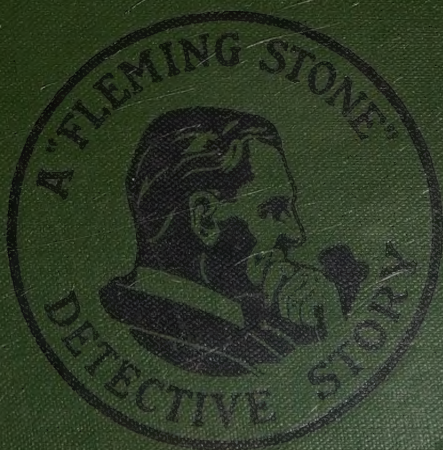


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CAROLYN
WELLS



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Author of "Vicky Van," "Spooky Hollow," etc.



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PRILLILGIRL

CHAPTER I

SOME PROPOSITION

GUY THORNDIKE was the owner of a rather beautiful house in a correct section of New York City, that no stretch of imagination could call a home.

Aristocratic and conventional of outward appearance and decorated interiorly by a professional, it was harmonious in atmosphere, but pretty unlivable.

Wherefore, Thorndike, being a bachelor, spent much of his time at his club.

But one day in June he sat under his own roof, giving an excellent imitation of a popular society man making his summer plans. It was only an imitation, though, and from the pile of letters before him he ran over and threw aside one cream-laid offer of hospitality after another, with smiles or frowns of dissent. He hated country house parties and week-end junketings, except among a very small and well chosen few.

In fact, he hated most things in this world that were not directly conducive to his own physical comfort or mental entertainment.

Though not a collector, Thorndike possessed three fine and valuable pieces of antique furniture—a highboy, a lowboy and a butler.

The last named and most valuable now stood in the doorway, and gave voice to a well modulated, "Mr. Thorndike," which he followed up with a less confident, "a young lady to see you, sir."

"What?—Oh, I beg your pardon—pray come in."

The butler faded, and in the doorway stood a girl—a very young girl—whose beauty was of the sort that makes you believe in fairies.

Moreover, she was frightened out of her wits and trying hard not to show it.

Now, Guy Thorndike was a petted and pampered darling of Fortune, but among the fine traits and lavish gifts with which the goddess had endowed him, was not included *savoir faire*.

In fact, to be frank, Thorndike was shy—fearfully, painfully shy—especially in the presence of strange ladies. This was one reason, though unadmitted to himself, that he couldn't achieve any enthusiasm over those cream-laid invitations. This was why he avoided, evaded and eluded hopeful Mammias with tentative daughters.

And so, when he saw this exquisite and terror-

shaken young thing, right in his own library, he was seized with a frantic desire to run away.

But of course he couldn't do that.

"W-won't you sit down?" he said, and she did. Timidly, fearfully, even tremblingly, she sat on the edge of a small chair.

She wore the daintiest sort of gown, of soft, drapy white, fashioned with a filmy *berthé* of lace over her soft little shoulders. A modish white hat had its brim lined with a faint shell pink, which haloed the lovely flower face.

"Did you want to see me?" and Thorndike's voice shook a little, by reason of his absurd but uncontrollable shyness.

"Yes—oh—yes!" and as the voice trembled breathlessly, two little hands fluttered to her breast like homing doves.

And then he knew! This was someone who adored him as a *Matinée Idol*. There were so many of them, though they seldom had the nerve to invade his dwelling. For Thorndike was an actor, one of the big, worth while actors, with a goodly line of successes in the past, and vague dreams of playing Shakespeare in the future.

So he knew. This was a hero worshipper, than which, in his bashful opinion, there was no more fearful wildfowl. You'd think experience would

have blunted the edge of his shyness, but the contrary was true. The longer he lived the more he found it impossible to conquer his fear of the Eternal Feminine.

He didn't mind actresses. They were not real people. But society ladies, young, old or middle-aged, always and completely flabbergasted him.

The vision looked at him earnestly—not staring—simply gazing. She was little and slim and lithe, yet softly rounded as a baby.

She had enormous brown eyes, with heavy, curling dark lashes, and, surprisingly, hair of true gold color. This hair rippled curlingly round her bonny face and shone out from under the pink lined hat.

Her nose was bewitching and her mouth was a quivering scarlet blossom.

But all of these definite beauties were blended into something finer and sweeter by a gentle charm that was simply that of youth and innocence.

Spring, April, dawn, dew, lark's notes, crocuses, pussy-willows—all such thoughts as these raced through Thorndike's brain at the sight of her exquisite youthfulness.

Her whole face was vibrant, as with some great excitement, and her smile was the kind that came off, and, after an exasperating delay, came on again.

“What do you want?” and Thorndike picked up a fountain pen, “my autograph?”

"No," the tone was quietly amused, but still frightened.

"Oh, my photograph," with a sigh. The more daring always asked for that and it included the autograph. He hated to spread his likeness broadcast, but he was always too shy to refuse; and so, many complacent maidens boasted possession of a signed portrait of the great actor.

The girl's glance was taking in the room. The only intrusion on its really good taste was the presence of many beautiful photographs of apparently beautiful actresses. They hung on the walls, they stood on tables and bookcases, and even congregated on Thorndike's big desk.

But, as has been said, his shyness did not include the ladies of his own profession and he had become able to accept these proffered favors with almost no embarrassment.

The girl visitor drew a little sigh. "Don't you get tired of looking at beautiful women?" she said.

"Not when they aren't alive," he returned.

Her flashing smile of appreciation brought him back to the realization that he was still in the presence of a very gentle specimen of the gentle sex, and he nervously opened the drawer where his photographs were kept.

"Is this what you want?" he asked, drawing one from its tissue sheath.

"N-no, sir. Mr. Thorndike, I—I—" she surveyed him with an appraising glance, and cast another quickly about the room—"I've decided to marry you."

"Beg pardon?"

"I s-said, I've quite decided to marry you."

"Bless my soul! There—there, now. Run home, little girl. Where did you come from?"

"I ran away from home. I can't run back, can I? Did you ever run away from home?"

"That's exactly what I did do—many years ago."

"And did you run back again?"

"I did not!"

"Well," and she folded her hands. A dimple appeared for a fleeting instant and then vanished, leaving the flower face a little sad. "I've run away. I can't run back. I can't face the world alone, and so somebody must marry me. Will you, please? Oh, *please!*"

"Are you crazy?"

"No, sir," and a flash of dignity straightened up the drooping little figure. "I'm not crazy. Oh, Mr. Thorndike, please! can't you understand? You haven't any wife, have you?"

"No."

"Then, don't you see? I might as well be it. I don't mean a real wife, who would be your help-

meet and your soulmate, and your equal. Not a regular wife, you know, just a near-wife. I just want to be Mrs. Guy Thorndike and have a wedding ring and a home. You needn't even speak to me after we're married, if you don't want to."

"Where are your people?"

"I haven't any. You see, I've lived all my life with my uncle and aunt in Spriggville."

"Spriggville?"

"Yes; it's a very small place, oh, very small. Just a post-office and two shops and a church and schoolhouse. Then a few houses at the four corners and a few farms out around."

"How attractive it sounds. And you live in one of the houses?"

"On one of the farms. My uncle, Mr. Sprigg, was quite rich, though a farmer. Well, you see, a few months ago, he died, and my aunt has all his money. Well, she's going to be—what *do* you think? You'd *never* guess! A missionary to China! And she says I must go with her and be a missionary, too. A girl of my type a missionary!"

"Yes, very nice, very nice. And when do you start?"

"I'm not going to start at all." The dark eyes looked straight into his. "But you see, I have no money, and if I don't go with Aunt Maria, she won't

give me any. And I won't go with her, I just simply won't. So, of course, I can't stay here all alone. So, of course, I must marry somebody. Please, Mr. Thorndike."

The girl could not have been more pleasantly pleading if she had been asking for a photograph instead of the original. And as there is a certain kind of coward who is brave in the face of a great danger, so Guy Thorndike's bashfulness faded before this astonishing situation.

"And you have no other people, no relatives, beside this missionary aunt?"

"None."

"And you have no money?"

"My face is my fortune."

Though the words might seem pert, the serious tone and the pathetic little sigh that accompanied them gave only the effect of a simple truth.

"And so you propose to marry to avoid being a missionary to China?"

"Yes, sir. However hard married life may be, it can't be as hard as missionarying in China."

"What do you know of married life?"

"Nothing, except as I have observed my aunt and uncle. They lived in a rut—I know that, because auntie has said so since uncle died. But surely,

a rut in this country would be better than any of those Chinese places."

"And may I ask why you singled me out for this honor?"

The gentle brown eyes looked at him reproachfully. "You may ask me anything you like, if you won't be sarcastic. I never could stand sarcasm. I'm perfectly serious. I came to you first, but I have two other men in view."

"You have? Who are they?"

"They're good enough men, but they are not like you. You see, I know a great deal about you from reading the papers. I know you are noble and upright in all your ways. I know you don't like ladies, and so I thought, perhaps, if you married me, you needn't be bothered by any more seekers."

"Seekers?"

"Yes; society girls who want to marry you."

"You flatter me."

"No, you know it's true. But I wouldn't trouble you at all. This house is so big, you could have a few rooms, and I could have the rest."

"And what would you contribute toward the general welfare of our household? Are you a capable housekeeper?"

"I'm a very good housekeeper of the old-fashioned sort. Aunt Maria brought me up to her own

manners and customs. But I learn very quickly and I can soon adapt myself to your ways."

"Can you cook?"

"Oh, yes, sir; but I didn't suppose you'd want me to do that. I thought you were rich. But I can cook, if you desire it."

"And might I inquire your name?"

"I am called Prillilgirl."

"I beg your pardon?"

"I said, Prillilgirl. My uncle always called me that."

"It is descriptive. But you have another name?"

"Yes; Uncle used to call me, 'Sweet o' the Year.' He also called me 'The Person of Moonshine.'"

"Your uncle was poetic."

"He read a great deal and he was very fond of me."

"He had a fine taste in names. Well, Miss Prillilgirl, I'm afraid you won't do. I'm sorry to disappoint you, but, quite aside from your proposition being a little unusual, I may say I don't need a wife at present. In fact, I'm quite positive I don't need a wife at all."

"Oh, yes, you do. You need the kind of wife I'd be. Why, I'd keep all to myself, in two or three rooms, if you want me to. And I'd keep as still

as a mouse—why, I wouldn't even sing while you're in the house, if you prefer that I shouldn't."

"But, my dear child, what you suggest is wrong."

The little creature sighed. Then she lifted very serious eyes to his. "If anything is pleasant, it is likely to be wrong," she said. "But this isn't, Mr. Thorndike. What could be wrong about your marrying me? And I am very amiable."

"H'm. And suppose I require other traits in a wife. Can you preside at a table properly?"

"Oh, yes, of course. But please decide, Mr. Thorndike, because if you really say no, I want to go on to Mr. Balcom's."

"What!"

"Yes, Mr. Balcom is my second choice. Of course, he isn't the same kind of actor you are—his line is broad comedy. According to the papers he makes people laugh like everything. But I've read that he's very rich and kind-hearted."

"He is, indeed! Now look here, Miss ——, tell me your name."

"Deane—Corinne Deane."

"Well, Miss Deane, you are fortunate in coming to me first. You're an ignorant, foolish baby and you might easily have met with great misfortune in this quest of yours. Now, you're not

going to Jo Balcom's at all, do you hear that? You're going straight home—"

"Then you refuse to marry me?" and she rose to go, with the air of a disappointed but resigned book agent.

"I do. And I also refuse to let you go to see Balcom or any other man on this errand of yours. What is the matter with you? Don't you know anything? I forbid you to go to Balcom's."

"Mr. Thorndike, you have no right to forbid me to do anything. I asked you to marry me, and you refused. Therefore, I go away, and it is absolutely none of your concern what I do next. I have a perfect right to refuse to go to China if I can arrange to stay in America. And I have a perfect right to manage these matters as I see fit."

There was no flippancy, no boldness in her manner. The big, soft eyes looked earnest and sincere, the sweet flower face was profoundly innocent and the red mouth quivered, not with embarrassment, but with disappointment at this first failure.

With a gentle dignity she moved toward the door, and Thorndike thundered, "Stop! Come back here!"

She half turned, and as hope dawned in her eyes, a wonderful radiance lighted her whole face.

"I will marry you," he cried; "I will marry you

to save you from yourself. As you suggest, it will not be real marriage, but I offer you the protection of my name and my home that you may not fall into Balcom's clutches. I don't want you, Lord knows! but I can't see an exquisite child like you set adrift on the world. We will go through the ceremony—you shall have a ring and a certificate. You can have this house, the whole house—I hate it, anyway—and you can amuse yourself as you like. I know you are good and sweet and dear, but I can't be encumbered with a wife—it would bore me to death. And I know, too," he looked straight in her eyes, "that you are good and true, and will never do anything to make me ashamed of you."

"Oh, indeed I wouldn't, when you are so kind as to marry me! Today, Mr. Thorndike? Right now?"

"Yes, as soon as we can put it across. I'll do some necessary telephoning, and then we'll have to go together to get a license. I think we'll be in time."

"And will this frock do? It's white."

"Wear what you choose," he returned, a little absently and thinking hard.

"Remember," he said, "you not only asked me to marry you, but you persuaded me against my will and against my judgment. There is to be no romance between us, but, of course, it precludes any

romance for either of us. I shall not mind this—for I want no romance; but—will you never regret?”

Miss Deane looked at him. “Maybe you’ll die,” she said, simply.

“Maybe I shall,” Thorndike returned, grimly. “Well, since you are to be my wife, I must tell you of my past romance. Some years ago I fancied myself in love with a lady, and bought this ring, hoping I could persuade her to wear it.”

Prillilgirl gave a rippling laugh. “I know,” and she clapped her hands in glee, “you were too shy to ask her!”

“Yes,” and Thorndike showed a little chagrin. “How did you know that, witch?”

“I’ve read about your shyness—and, I can see it for myself. That’s one reason I like you. But you didn’t have to ask me, did you? It would have been nice to be asked—” the brown eyes looked wistful.

“Well, you never will be, now,” Thorndike spoke almost roughly; “you’ve lost your last chance. But this ring must be for you, now.”

She held out her hand with a gesture of confidence and content.

Bashful Guy Thorndike trembled as he took it, and he nearly fell in a blue funk as he pushed the ring on her finger.

Corinne Deane looked at the gleaming diamond.

Thorndike watched her, waiting for her comment. Surely she had never before owned such a magnificent possession.

"I feel like a Great Jewel Robbery," she said, at last, and added, smiling, "but it's a very nice feeling."

"What will your aunt say to all this?" he inquired, curiously.

The lovely shoulders shrugged a little. "It doesn't matter what she says. Shall I tell her about it?"

"I think it would be rather decent, don't you?"

"As you like. I'll write her tonight."

As Guy Thorndike was not only an actor, but an actor-manager, he went about his present undertaking with the efficiency that characterized all his work. He telephoned to several people, he gave some directions to his servants, and then he whisked Prillilgirl into his car, and down to the Marriage License Bureau, in time to get there just before that important institution closed.

He said little, making only casual and necessary observations.

Prillilgirl was passive. She merely sat pretty and watched him with the mild gaze of her big brown eyes, her face now and then lighting up, as with some thought of happiness.

He took her to the house of a friend, there was a wedding ceremony, witnesses and good wishes, but nothing of a social or festive nature.

Prillilgirl seemed not to care, and smiled prettily on the small group of people as she left them to go away with Thorndike.

He put her in the car, followed and sat beside her, and then they started home.

And then, for the first time, he realized what he had done. A wave of shy embarrassment engulfed him and he shrank back into his corner as if he had committed a crime, and he was not sure he hadn't. He stole a glance at the girl beside him. Her beauty was so perfect that not even the sharp rays of the afternoon sun could expose a flaw.

But it was not this beauty that had caused Thorndike to take the step he had. He had done it purely and simply to protect this lovely and innocent child from a wicked world. He did not know whether he regretted it or not, and that did not matter. He simply had to do it. He was appalled at the situation and the very enormity of the case gave him a sort of artificial bravado, which, though difficult to achieve, he sometimes found useful.

Thorndike was, in common with most of his fellow creatures, a mixture of good and bad. Thirty-six years old, he had the wisdom of his years com-

bined with a certain childlike simplicity of spirit that was in part the result of his unconquerable shyness.

As an actor he was among the best; as a manager he was equally successful; but his ambitions were high, and he still had worlds to conquer.

His chief desire was to play a certain sort of character that he had in mind, and which, only recently, he had so described to a playwright that he had at last a hope of securing the play he was looking for.

Mallory Vane was eccentric almost to the verge of madness, but he could write, and he seemed to be the only man who could comprehend the intricate details of the character Thorndike wanted to portray. This was the actor-manager's life work at present, and had been, in contemplation, for years. His mind and soul were full of it, and he spent hours with Vane going over the hints and shades of meaning in lines, and suggesting changes and improvements in the author's work.

Though generous in all material things, Thorndike was exceedingly selfish in his ambitions. Self-centered, rather, and ready to bend all to his own histrionic successes.

But he had always a ready and overflowing sympathy for those in distress or trouble, and helped

them with unstinted assistance of money, influence or friendship, as might be required.

And now, the most exigent case of need he had ever known had been brought to his attention, and with characteristic readiness, he had given what seemed to him at the moment, the only possible response.

CHAPTER II

MRS. GUY THORNDIKE

Thorndike felt perplexed as he gazed at the girl beside him. It didn't occur to him that he was a bridegroom, he felt more like a man who had impulsively bought a piece of bric-a-brac that didn't harmonize with his other furnishings.

Summoning his courage to the point of speaking aloud, he said:

"Now, Prillilgirl—I shall call you that, I think, because it suits you so well—though Sweet o' the Year is pretty for you, too—you are now Mrs. Thorndike, and you must behave accordingly."

"Yes, sir;" the lady addressed looked at the gold circlet on her finger and smiled pleasantly.

"First, you mustn't say 'sir' to me."

"No, sir."

"Are you listening?"

"Oh, yes, sir. But you see I'm so busy being married that I've not much time for anything else."

"Pshaw, you're a baby and a simpleton."

"Yes, sir."

Thorndike sulked. But Prillilgirl paid no attention and it was quite evident that she was really oblivious of his presence. She sat up very straight

and looked every inch a thoroughbred. Her white frock and pink lined hat were entirely correct and very becoming and her exquisite face beamed with radiant joy.

Though they spoke no word she was all unconscious of any awkwardness between them.

At last she said; "if I can't call you sir, then what shall I call you? Mr. Thorndike?"

"No, not Mr. Thorndike! Heavens, what a little fool you are!"

"Yes, sir," but a dimple flashed into sight and out again.

"Call me Guy," he muttered, in a voice constrained by shyness.

"Guy! It doesn't suit you a bit," and the little head cocked on one side like a doubtful bird while the brown eyes regarded him seriously. "I think you're a 'Man of Wax'."

"Meaning you so easily molded me to your wishes?"

"Oh, no, that isn't what I mean at all! Don't you know, in Romeo and Juliet, where they call Paris a Man of Wax?"

'A man of all the world, a Man of Wax.

Verona's summer hath not such a flower.'

Fie, don't you know your Shakespeare? You who want to play it!"

"How do you know I want to play Shakespeare?"

"I know everything about you."

"Well, keep your knowledge to yourself!"

"Yes, sir. Oh, Guy, I'm so glad I have a home of my own! You can't imagine how lonesome and friendless I felt when I rang your doorbell."

"I should think you would!"

"Yes, I did. Oh, this is heaps better than going to China. Isn't China an awful place?"

"So I'm told."

"What do you like to do best? Recreation, I mean."

"Golf and bridge. Do you play them?"

"No, but I can learn. However, there's no occasion, as I'm not going to bother you with my presence. That's understood."

"See that you remember that."

"Yes, sir. Oh, I'm so crazy to get home, I can't seem to wait. Have you picked out my rooms for me?"

"The housekeeper, Mrs. Lamb, will look after that. You can have the most attractive suite, of course, and you can refurnish it to suit your own taste. You can take the summer for it, if you choose—I shall be away at various places until fall. Or, if you care to go away this summer, leave your redecorations until you return."

"Oh, I don't want to go away—I've just got here. I'll see to it all." She nodded her lovely head with evident satisfaction at the prospect. "Will the servants stay in town all summer?"

"If I tell them to."

"Lovely! When do you go? Tomorrow?"

"Are you so anxious to be rid of me?"

"You know it isn't that, my Man of Wax." The flower face turned toward him and the eloquent brown eyes spoke mute reproach. "But I don't want to bother you."

"Very well, then keep to your own rooms."

"Yes, sir—I mean yes, Guy."

But her speech was perfunctory and unheeding and her gaze wandered as she hummed a little tune.

"Don't hum! It annoys me."

She stopped humming but she kept smiling and her eyes danced as they drove past attractive shop windows.

She turned to him like a happy child. "Tomorrow I'm going shopping—to buy frocks—ooh!—and negligees, crowded with lace—oo! oo!—and HATS! Oh, Guy, won't it be heavenly!"

Thorndike looked at her coldly.

His natural kindness would have been glad to sympathize with her overflowing joy at the thought of buying finery, but the very idea embarrassed him

and the sight of the raptured little face fairly paralyzed his mind. Moreover, he was thinking over a new scene for his play, and he preserved a self-absorbed silence.

Suddenly she turned toward him with a little puzzled look. "Guy, am I completely married?"

"Why not?"

"You didn't kiss me."

He flushed and dropped his eyes in an agony of shyness.

But the situation had to be met.

"Look here," he said, sternly, "we're not going to have any kissing or any of that foolishness."

"No, sir—oh, no! But that's a different sort of kiss. Guy, why do women want to be Suffragettes?"

"Most women don't. Do you?"

"Mercy, no! I'm happily married! Guy, shall I have an allowance or bills?"

"Both, if you like."

"Oh!" with a rapturous clasp of her hands. "But aren't you afraid I'll be extravagant?"

"You may, if you choose. You may as well understand, Prillilgirl—I don't care what you do. I will give you an allowance, and you may charge things at certain shops, but don't bother me with details. If you are too extravagant, I shall tell you

so. Until I do, buy what you like. I'm not too much alarmed on that score."

"Yes, sir."

"You shall have a little motor of your own, electric, if you prefer, and you can have the big car whenever you want it. But you're not to be eternally running to me for this or that. Your rooms are on the third floor. I'm on the fourth. Don't ever come up there."

The brown eyes opened wide at him. "What would I want to go up there for?"

"Well, I thought you might be one of those women who are all over the place."

"Oh, no, I promised not to bother you, and I always keep my promise. This is our 'Last Ride Together,' as Mr. Browning has it. But you'll be away all summer."

"Yes, off and on. How do you come to know so much poetry?"

"Uncle read it to me a great deal. We were both fond of it."

"And your aunt?"

"Oh, no, she didn't like it a bit. That's why I couldn't go to China with her. May I buy lots of poetry books?"

"I told you to buy what you like and not refer such matters to me. I'm not interested."

A pleasant smile greeted the speech and then Prillilgirl again became absorbed in her own thoughts.

Thorndike pondered. Clearly, she was not to be affronted or insulted by his indifference and even rudeness, but he could see plainly that this was not because of a determination not to be, but because of her own sublime indifference and demeanor.

He had plunged into this mad experiment, and he was neither glad nor sorry. She meant nothing to him, but as he had not wanted to marry any one else, it was little for him to do to give his name and protection to this lovely child.

When they reached the house, he handed her out of the car with punctilious courtesy, and as they entered, he said simply, to the valuable butler, "Webb, this is Mrs. Thorndike. Her word is law in the house. Inform the other servants and send Lamb to me."

The smile that Prillilgirl gave the butler completed his bewilderment and almost jarred his conventional calm.

Appeared then Mrs. Lamb, housekeeper and general manager of the whole establishment.

Hers was one of those rarely found natures that follow literally the Scriptural injunction to be wise as a serpent and harmless as a dove.

Fair, fat and forty, Mrs. Lamb was a retired

actress, having at one time played in Thorndike's company, and even then marked out by him as a wonderful woman in her way.

For she was capable of running the actor's home as he wanted it run; she attended to everything, in her own province or out of it; she settled all questions, quelled all insurrections, smoothed out any possible roughness that came in the path of her adored master, and was in every way the keystone of the whole edifice.

Moreover, she was comely to look upon, and was most pleasant spoken.

It was, then, with a feeling of relief that Thorndike shifted his newly acquired responsibility on to the shoulders of his First Goldstick-in-waiting.

"Lamb," he aid, quietly, "this is Mrs. Thorndike. Please look after her. She will have the pink and gray suite and you will cherish her as the apple of your eye."

There was about as much sentiment in his tone as if he had been reciting the catechism, but the housekeeper took his words at their face value, and laying a motherly hand on Prillilgirl's arm she said, "Come with me, my dear."

Smiling into Mrs. Lamb's pleasant face, the girl started to go, but Thorndike, struggling with something that he felt he must say, blurted out;

"Do you—do you care to dine with me?"

"Oh, no," returned his happy bride. "I don't want to bother you. And, beside, I'd ever so much rather have a tray brought to my room. I've always wanted to do that. Get into a kimono, you know, and sit around and just gloat over my beautiful, heavenly new home."

"Very well, then, I think I'll dine at the Club."

"Yes, sir. Oh, everything is so lovely. Good bye, and thank you so much for marrying me."

She went off with Mrs. Lamb, and Thorndike stood a moment alone, with a mental picture of that radiant, smiling face with its wonderful eyes and the golden curls clustering under the pink lined hat.

"Gee!" he remarked to himself; "Gee!"

Then he went to his Club for dinner and the story having spread like wildfire, he was greeted by his comrades with shouts and hails of varying tenor.

"Shut up!" said Thorndike, pleasantly, and they did.

"Bless me!" said Mrs. Lamb, fervently, as she led her charge up the broad stairway, "I'm free to confess I don't often get such a come-at as this! It's all right—Guy Thorndike never did anything that wasn't all right, but I was as surprised as a shot partridge when he said you were his wife. His wife! and you a mere Kindergarten Kid!"

"Well, you see," Prillilgirl smiled engagingly,

he doesn't exactly want a wife—he says wives bother him—and I'm determined not to bother him. You may not think it, Lamb, but I'm a person of great determination. When I make up my mind to do a thing I never stop till it's done. Why, when I am really determined, I'm terrible as an army with banners! Truly I am."

"You don't look it," Lamb commented quietly. "But, now, Mrs. Thorndike, here's your suite. And pretty enough for anybody, I'll say."

"It's perfectly lovely! I'll rearrange the furniture some, and maybe have another mirror door put in there—"

"Are you vain, then?"

"Yes, I think I am. But not always. Not when I have something better than myself to think about. And now, you see, I have! This beautiful new home and—oh, a whole new life to arrange and play with! And you, Lamb, dear—I'm so happy to have you."

The words were sincere, for the attitude of the housekeeper was sympathetic and congenial.

Lora Lamb had been a good reliable actress in her insignificant rôles but she had been glad to give up her stage life to keep house for Thorndike, whom she adored in a motherly way.

Though only a few years older than the actor, she was possessed of the maternal instinct and she

looked after his welfare and comfort as few paid servants could have done.

And now, that he had brought home a wife, and had put her in her care, Lamb willingly accepted the new responsibility, and prepared to look after two instead of one.

She didn't understand it all, but Lamb was wise in her own conceit and she had long ago discovered that to keep her mouth shut and her eyes open was the straight and narrow path to knowledge of most sorts.

So she accepted Prillilgirl as she would have done a more inanimate innovation, and soon became a devoted slave as well as guardian.

The days went by and Mr. Guy Thorndike was in no way bothered by his recent acquisition. He never saw Prillilgirl. He learned that she had adapted for her dining room a small unused room on the first floor, but quite often had her meals served in her own boudoir.

Whether by accident or design, her goings and comings never coincided with his own, and so far as he was concerned, Thorndike's home was in no way changed.

He scorned to question Mrs. Lamb, or Webb, the butler, but he learned a little from them unasked.

One day Webb appeared, and said, a little hesitatingly, " Beg pardon, sir, Mrs. Thorndike's com-

pliments, sir, and she would like to know when you are going away."

"I don't know when I shall go. Why?"

The butler coughed a little. "She didn't bid me say, sir, but I think I may venture that she desires to paper the walls and such things."

"Tell her to paper the walls and such things, then. It will not incommode me in any way."

"Yes, sir. Very good, sir."

Apparently Prillilgirl was satisfied with this permission, for within a few days an army of decorators camped in the house.

Thorndike looked on with a slight but pardonable curiosity, and one day passing through a hall, he chanced upon her. She flashed a smile at him and scurried away like a frightened rabbit.

Given a moment to think, he wouldn't have touched her, but the emergency of the moment gave him nerve, and with two strides he overtook her and grasping her by the shoulders swung her suddenly round.

"What is it, Guy?" she asked, startled; "have I spent too much money?"

"No, you little idiot! I only want to ask you—if—you would care to—if you will—"

"Yes, sir!" she said, calmly.

"Confound you! Sweet o' the Year, I want you to—to dine with me tonight."

"Where?"

"Here—at home."

Prillilgirl looked doubtful. "I'm awfully busy today," she said, and her brown eyes looked up at him from under the tumbled gold curls. He had never before seen her without a hat.

"Yes, you're flying round like a ten-horse-power hen!"

"Am I?" She was entirely untroubled by his presence, but seemed anxious he should go. He sensed this, and perversely stayed.

Thorndike was of the intellectual rather than the handsome type of Thespian. Tall, dark, lean, at thirty-five he was the best liked actor in New York city. But his irremediable shyness prevented him from being really popular.

His strong, fine face had an eager look as if longing for the happiness only achieved by the absence of self-consciousness.

He was sometimes bashful with men, more so with women, and in the presence of young girls he was most ill at ease of all.

But as he looked at Prillilgirl he vowed to himself that he would overcome his nervousness and speak to her calmly, naturally, even banteringly.

She met his gaze serenely and waited for his word.

None came. The more he tried to say something light and airy, the more he couldn't think of a thing to say. What subject had he in common with this exquisite bit of youthfulness?

Prillilgirl herself broke the silence.

"When do you begin to act again?" she inquired.

Now as it happened she couldn't have chosen a more unlucky subject. Devoted to his art, Thorn-dike shrank sensitively from speaking of it to anybody except his confreres, and the opening of the subject was quite enough to upset his tottering equilibrium. "Don't discuss my work! You know nothing of it!" he said.

"Oh, yes, I do," the flower face smiled. "I know you're going to open in the fall with a new play by Zalinski."

"How do you know that?"

"I read it in the paper, I think. Is it a secret?"

"How old are you?"

"Nineteen. Why?"

"You said twenty-one when we went for the license."

"Had to, or we couldn't get it at all. But really I'm nineteen."

"I'm nearly twice that."

"Are you?"

The cool, polite tone implied that if he had been four times or eight times it wouldn't have mattered to her. Her calm indifference maddened Thorndike, though he certainly didn't want her enthusiasm.

"You needn't think I admire you," he said, savagely.

"No, sir."

"I've seen too many pretty women to be caught by the ingenue type."

"Am I that?"

"What?"

"Ingenue type?"

"Yes, and a silly specimen of it."

Prillilgirl laughed outright.

"Isn't it fortunate you don't care what I am?"

"No, not a bit; I wish I did."

"Well, you don't and you never will." She shrugged her shoulders comfortably as if that subject was settled in the most satisfactory way.

Thorndike lapsed into silence. He honestly tried to think of something to say but the presence of that smiling young thing froze the words on his lips. It was foolish, he knew perfectly well just how foolish it was, but he couldn't help it. If she had been embarrassed, he might have risen to the occasion, but her confounded ease and irritating happiness were an insurmountable barrier to conversation so far as he was concerned.

He resented the situation and he sulked, which was his final resource when absolutely exasperated at his own defects.

At last Prillilgirl sighed. It was an adorable soft little sigh, like that of a tired child.

"I'm afraid I bother you," she said, "and I'm awfully sorry. Would you like me to go away?"

"Not necessary. I'm going away myself to-morrow, for a fortnight."

"Yes, sir."

"Will you stop saying 'sir'?"

"Yes, sir, I forgot. Oh, there, I forgot again!" A little laugh rang out, of pure amusement, and Thorndike knew instinctively that there was no roguishness or teasing in her repeated use of the forbidden word.

"Do you care?" he said.

"Care for what?"

"Care that I'm going away?"

"No, indeed; why should I?"

"Are you glad?"

"Yes, sir—I mean, yes, Guy."

"Why?"

"Because I can sing all I like, and I can go all over the house if I choose—except, of course, in your rooms—and I can dine in the big dining room if I want to—and, oh, I can do lots of things."

Her voice was vibrant with joy and her big brown eyes danced and sparkled.

"Are you happy?" and Thorndike looked at her curiously.

"Oh, yes, indeed!"

"I'm glad of it," he said, more gently than he had ever spoken to her. "Good-bye, Little One. Good-bye, Prillilgirl."

If she felt any surprise at this sudden dismissal, she showed it not at all. Rather, a smile of relief flashed across her lovely face and dropping a quaint little curtsey, which he did not see, she ran back to her own apartments.

CHAPTER III

GUY'S CROWD

THORNDIKE came home from his trip before the two weeks were up. This was due to accident and was not intentional, but as he reached his house just at dinner time, he felt a certain curiosity to learn what Prillilgirl might be up to.

It was late June, but the evening was pleasantly cool and as he entered the house he saw shaded lights in the big dining room, and went straight out there. The table was laid with as much formality as if for a party, but Prillilgirl sat alone in her place. Thorndike's quick eye noted that there was another place laid opposite to her at the table, and a fierce anger stirred him. Was this child inviting other guests in his absence? His anger was all the deeper because a latent sense of justice seemed to tell him that his neglect gave her a certain latitude.

When she saw him enter an expression of fear came over her lovely face. Not a tragic fear, but the frightened look of a small child caught in mischief. She sprang from her seat and whirled at him.

"Webb," she cried, "remove that, quickly!"

As she spoke, she put two little hands lightly but firmly across Thorndike's eyes, but not before he

had caught a glimpse of flashing silver in the butler's hands and he could hear hurried steps, most unusual for the impeccable Webb.

A moment, then the shielding hands were taken away, and Prillilgirl smiled up at him. Webb was correctly in his place, and Thorndike's curiosity was thoroughly roused.

"What did you have taken away from that place?"

"Nothing."

"All the silver is on the table that is necessary for dinner. Webb, place a cover for Mr. Thorndike."

"There is a cover already placed," Thorndike said, sternly. "Were you expecting a guest?"

"A guest! How absurd! I don't know any one."

"Then why this other place laid?"

Prillilgirl looked at him, and gave a little half smile. "For you, in case you came home unexpectedly."

Her gaze was so honest, her expression so sincere, that Thorndike's mind was evenly divided between two opinions. Either she was speaking the absolute truth, or she was the most consummate and accomplished liar he had ever seen, and he inclined to the latter. But as she continued to meet his gaze without faltering, he almost decided she was truthful, and he took a seat at the table.

But the dinner was not a success. Thorndike

was so nervous he could scarcely speak and could not eat at all. Prillilgirl was perfectly at ease and ate with a normal appetite, enjoying the delicate dishes with appreciation.

She began to chatter. She was gay, insouciant and altogether charming. But entirely impersonal. She gave Thorndike no word or look of welcome, she said nothing that implied the faintest interest in him or his doings, but she told of her own affairs and how she had redecorated her boudoir and had bought a white Pomeranian.

With the contrariness of which women are sometimes mistakenly said to hold the monopoly, Thorndike resented her very apparent happiness.

He had spent the two weeks yachting with some friends, and incidentally, had been bored stiff, but he thought she might make a few inquiries out of mere politeness.

He ignored that it had been arranged she was to have no interest in his affairs, and he was most unreasonably annoyed because she seemed to be in a state of enjoyment.

"You seem very happy," he grumbled.

"I am!" with a beaming smile.

"Why are you so happy?"

"'Cause I've been singing so much."

"Why have you been singing so much?"

"'Cause I'm so happy!"

Thorndike laughed in spite of himself, and immediately was angry with himself for laughing. Truly, his was not an admirable disposition, but only those who are conversant with the vagaries of an over-shy and over-sensitive nature can understand the perversities that accompany such. Moreover, one thing rankled.

"What was that piece of silver you told Webb to take away?"

"That I shall never tell you, and you have no right to ask."

There was no smile now, but the brown eyes looked into his with a dignity and justice that carried conviction.

But he would not desist.

"You expected some one else to dinner?"

"And if I did, what of it? Surely, I may do as I choose in my own home. But, as I told you, Guy, I couldn't invite any one if I wanted to—for I have no friends in New York."

Have you any in Spriggville that you would like to entertain?"

"No."

"Do you want friends, Corinne?"

"I promised not to bother you."

"Well, it wouldn't bother me much to provide a few friends for you. Would you like to meet

some girls of your own age. I can arrange it quite easily."

"No, Guy, thank you. I hate to bother you, but since you offer me friends, I would like some, but I don't want girls. I'd like to know a few nice young men."

"I think I can hardly have heard you aright."

"I said I should like to meet some young men. Attractive ones. Society men, who know the world."

"Indeed! And what do you propose to do with these young men?"

"I thought perhaps they might invite me to go to a cabaret show. Lamb says she can't take me."

Thorndike looked at her. He still had that strange uncertainty whether she could be the innocent baby she looked or whether she was a deep-dyed little villain scheming for adventures.

And as usual, her clear-eyed gaze convinced him, at least for the moment, of her truth and honesty.

Yet even as he opened his mouth to speak, he was uncertain whether to swear at her or to speak gently.

"Corinne," he said, "I don't think you quite know what you are talking about. In our walk of life it isn't considered the thing for a wife to go about with other men than her husband."

"Oh," and Mrs. Thorndike looked thoughtful.
"Very well, Guy. I beg your pardon."

"Didn't you really know that?" and Thorndike's smile was a little quizzical.

"I suppose I knew it in a general way," and the flower face looked troubled. "But, you see, Guy, we are so—so different from other married people, that I thought it would be all right for me to go with somebody else and not bother you. It is foolish, I suppose, but I have always wanted to see a cabaret, or a Café Chantant. Aren't they very attractive?"

"Why, Sweet o' the Year, they are not attractive to me—but I suppose you would like to see one. I don't believe you'd care to go a second time. It's only a case of ungratified curiosity on your part."

"Yes, that's it. But I do want to see it once. How old shall I have to be, Guy, before I can go alone?"

"Good Heavens! Don't you know *anything*? You never could go alone, not if you were a thousand years old!"

"Well," and Prillilgirl drew a soft little sigh of regret, "then I suppose I must give it up. I'm sorry I bothered you about it, for you have filled my life so full of joy and happiness that it is ungrateful of me to ask for anything more."

Thorndike looked at her. What a queer little

bundle she was, apparently all made up of joyfulness, ignorance and beauty, each of which she possessed to a most appalling degree.

"The truth is," he burst out, "I don't know what to do with you!"

"It's all my fault, and I'm awfully sorry. I promised not to bother you a bit if you'd only marry me, and here I've gone and bothered you a whole lot! If you'll forgive me this time, I'll never do anything of the sort again."

"Very well, see that you remember that. There's no use talking, Corinne, I can't take you around with me. You'd make me no end of trouble driving off the men."

"Are all the men bad?"

"Yes, every one. You can't have anything to do with them, for I can't be everlastingly tagging at your heels! You'll have to amuse yourself without society. Can you?"

"Yes, of course I can, Guy, and you know it. You married me, and I'll never ask you to do another thing for me in all my life."

"Very well. Now I'll ask you one question and I'll never ask you another in all my life. What was that silver thing you made Webb hide when I came in here?"

Prillilgirl stepped out of the room a moment, and returned with something she held behind her.

"Please don't make me show it to you, Guy," she pleaded; "I don't want to one single little bit."

"You must," he said, coldly, and he stood, with folded arms, waiting.

Slowly, Prillilgirl brought her hands in front of her and disclosed a photograph of Thorndike in a silver frame.

She looked him squarely in the eyes with a funny little touch of dignity which she assumed on certain occasions. "I set it at your place," she said, "to make believe you were there. Then when you came in unexpectedly, I didn't want you to see it, so I told Webb to take it away. Good night, Guy."

"Good night, Prillilgirl," and he stood looking after her as she left the room and went up the stairs.

A few days later, Thorndike sent an imperative message for Prillilgirl to appear in the library at once.

"Lemmelone!" remarked Mrs. Thorndike, as Lamb woke her from an afternoon nap to tell her this.

It was a warm day, and Prillilgirl was drowsy, but when she sensed the situation she sprang up.

"Good gracious me!" she exclaimed, as she flew to the mirror. "Give me a fresh frock, Lambie, and some white shoes."

She kicked off her boudoir slippers and twisted

up her gold curls at the same time, and in a few moments was garbed in a smart but very simple lingerie gown with a touch of pale green ribbon about it.

Then she tripped along the halls in the wake of Webb, who opened doors or held curtains for her until she was in the august presence of Thorndike.

With the flush of sleep still on her baby cheeks, Prillilgirl was a picture to charm Saint Anthony himself. But if Guy Thorndike were charmed he gave no sign of it.

"You're too confounded pretty," he muttered under his breath, and scowled at her as he met her at the library door.

"Yes, Guy," and her smile was merely that of one who is politely resigned to her awful fate.

"Come in, Pril," he said, aloud; "here are some people who want to meet you."

And to the girl's intense amazement, she found a gay group of men and women, sitting or standing about, and seemingly, very much at home there.

So this was Guy's crowd. This was the sort of people with whom he was at ease and unembarrassed.

"Me first!" cried a tall, beautiful woman, jumping up and crossing the room quickly. "Well, you are a peach!" she exclaimed, as she grasped Pril-

lilgirl's shoulders and almost shook her. "What do you mean by looking like that? Are you real?"

The banter was gay and the voice merry, but instinctively Prillilgirl felt the resentment expressed by that clutch on her shoulders. She knew at once that this woman was an enemy and to be feared.

With canny prescience she disarmed her for the moment, by a frank gaze of admiration and said in a gentle voice, "Yes, Beautiful Lady, I am real. Are you?"

"Not very," was the response and still the long slender hands held her shoulders. "I am Agatha Barr—"

"I know," said Prillilgirl, "the great actress. I am proud to know you."

And then others claimed introduction and Prillilgirl was frankly and openly admired and commented on.

"Found her in Sir Joshua Reynolds' scrap book, I suppose," said one man.

"Or in Kate Greenaway's" said another.

Thorndike said nothing, but his eyes rested on Prillilgirl with more of bored anxiety than admiration.

He cared nothing for her himself, but he didn't want this horde of people to turn her head.

As he watched, however, he was forced to the con-

clusion that she could look after herself. Her manner was perfect; modest without being shy. Bright, even piquant, without being forward. Where had she learned such finesse? And then he realized it was not acquired, but merely the simplicity of her own frank, unembarrassed nature.

He looked at Agatha Barr.

Clearly, she was disturbed. He chuckled to himself. Agatha—Thousand Ship Agatha, as she was called—disturbed by a doll-faced chit—no, that was unfair. Doll-faced the child was not. Angel-faced, fairy-faced, pastel, Greuze-like—all these—but never doll-faced.

Thorndike sighed. What could he do with her? He had not wanted to introduce her into this set, but they had insisted until he could no longer refuse. And now they had set upon her like a pack of hungry lions.

There were less than a dozen, altogether, but to Prillilgirl it seemed like a mob. She began to get a little frightened, and looked about for Guy. But he had stepped into another room with Agatha, and she couldn't see him.

A man came and sat by her, pushing one or two others aside.

"Mrs. Thorndike," he said, in a gentle well-bred voice, "may I introduce myself? I kept off

at first, in order to make a more effective entrance later." He smiled pleasantly. "I am Mallory Vane, and one of your husband's very good friends, but a sad scapegrace. That's why I venture to ask your friendship."

This gay appeal quite took the fancy of Prillil-girl, and she smiled at the handsome speaker.

"Mr. Thorndike will be back in a moment," she said, glancing uncertainly about. "He must be in the drawing room."

"Yes, he is. But he said I was to make friends with you."

Prillilgirl looked at him.

"Did Mr. Thorndike say that?" she asked, not in surprise, but as if desiring corroboration.

"Yes," but Mallory Vane's eyes fell before the brown ones that looked at him so coolly.

"You are not telling the truth," she said, but with such a calm air of making a mere statement that it scarce sounded like an accusation.

"I beg your pardon," Vane said, just because he didn't know what else to say.

"I said, you are not telling the truth; you are telling a wrong story. My husband didn't say that to you."

Vane was completely bowled over. The entrancing face wore an expression of such good-humored

tolerance and at the same time such aloofness from his proposition, and the beautiful eyes looked at him with a smile so tantalizing yet unafraid, that he lost his head.

"No matter what he said or didn't say, we're going to be friends. Come, I want you to dance with me—I'll turn on the music."

He rose, and took one of her hands, and clasping her other dimpled elbow, urged her to rise.

The brown eyes flashed one look of surprise and indignation at him and then turned to see Thorndike approaching.

"Guy," she said, simply, "will you please speak to this man?"

"What are you doing, Vane?" said Thorndike.

"I'm going to dance with your wife."

"I don't think you are. I want to talk to you myself. Now, Vane, you'll have to decide between me and Larkin. If you're going to give him your new play, say so—and I'll look elsewhere. But you know how much I want it—it's the very idea I've wanted for so long. That iron hand in the velvet glove effect is just my *metier*. I can play it as I've never played before. And your plot is great—I say, Vane, sign a contract with me for the thing, will you?"

"But Larkin claims it—"

"You bet I do!" and Dan Larkin joined the group.

He was a short, stout man, with pop eyes, close together and a bald head. But his smile was kindly, and the glance he cast at Prillilgirl was one of respectful admiration.

He sat down, and the three men began to talk, so interestedly that they took no notice of the little lady.

For great matters were at stake.

Thorndike, both as actor and manager, wanted the play Vane had just completed; and Larkin, a rival manager, declared it was the play he had ordered from Vane and lawfully belonged to him.

No compromise could be effected, for Larkin would never let Thorndike play in one of his productions. He had his own star, and though he and Guy were friendly enough when all went smoothly, in time of stress they had been known to quarrel deeply.

And this affair was at a deadlock. Vane, himself a poet, and this his first play, was ready and willing to give it over to either, though anxious to get the best price possible for his masterpiece.

"I've done this," he had said to them, "but I may never do another. I don't feel that it is mort-

gaged to Larkin—I'm more than willing to let you have it, Guy, but it's for sale to the highest bidder."

"Nothing of the sort," Larkin insisted. "I ordered a play from you, Vane. You wrote it—this is it. Now, how can you honorably sell it to Thorndike?"

"I don't see it as a question of honor," Vane retorted. "I have a play for sale. I sell it to my own best advantage. That is all."

"And I want it, because it just suits my own needs," Guy put in. "You don't really want it, Dan. Your Jeffreys couldn't play in it—not as it should be played—"

"Have you seen it?" asked Larkin; "have you read it?"

"No," said Guy, "but Vane has told me the plot and quoted some of the lines. It's just what I want. It will make me—do be reasonable, Dan."

"I am reasonable, and I reason that I want that play myself. And what's more, I'm going to have it. Hear that, Vane? If you let anyone else have that play, I'll sue you for breach of contract—and I can put that over, too!"

Mallory Vane knew this, for Larkin had ways and means of putting things over that were rather difficult to combat.

"All right, Lark, guess you'll have to have it," he said, but Thorndike broke in angrily:

"Nothing of the sort. Let me have it, Dan. I'll pay you a bonus, and Mallory will write you another play, won't you, Vane?"

"If I get all the price I want for this one, I shan't write another very soon," returned the indolent author. "I've worked like a dog on this one, and I want a good long vacation before tackling another."

"Well, anyway, you'll give Larkin your next one," Guy urged.

"I don't want the next one," the rival manager declared. "I want this one. He'll never do another like this. It's a freak, a sport—I've read part of it, and it's—why, it's classic. You may as well give up, Guy, I've got the whip hand, and the play is mine."

"I don't give up," Thorndike was growing obstinate. "We'll drop the subject for the present, but understand, Larkin, I don't give up. That play is to be mine, and I'm going to produce it and play in it."

The guests went away at last, and, uncertain what to do next, Prillilgirl stood for a moment contemplating the moody, clouded face of Thorndike as he stood, lighting a cigarette.

Suddenly he turned to her. He frowned, then he scowled.

Then he said, "Go away, Corinne. My, but you're a nuisance! I don't know what I'm going to do with you! I don't want to see you around."

"Yes, Guy," and she started to leave the room.

"Come back here, wait a minute."

The little white figure came back and stood before him, the exquisite baby face as dear and sweet as ever.

"Now, look here, I'm going to send you up to a farmhouse in the mountains for the summer. Get your things ready. Take Lamb and your dog and anything you want to. Be ready day after tomorrow."

"Yes, Guy, indeed I will; oh, I know I shall love it, in the mountains. Are they high mountains Guy?"

"Yes. I don't know. Fairly high—now, get out!"

"Yes, Guy. You are so good to me—and make such lovely plans for me. Thank you, Guy."

The clear-eyed smile he received proved beyond all shadow of doubt the entire absence of sarcasm and the happy little flower face turned from him and disappeared.

CHAPTER IV

THE AGGRESSIVENESS OF AGATHA

"You see, Lamb," Prillilgirl was saying, "it's lovely of my husband to send me away to a farm, for the city is hot and dusty, they say, in July—"

"Yes, ma'am, it's all that, and more—with its noise and dirt, and full of ridiculous people trailing in from hick burgs to buy stuff for their little Main Street shops."

"Yes, I s'pose so—but—you see I've lived on a farm all my life, and I'd rather spend the summer on anything else."

"I know—I know, Mrs. Thorndike—but don't you worry—it'll be all right—you won't have to go—no, no—you shan't stir a step where you don't want to stir. You leave it to me."

"You're such a comfort, Lamb. But don't you say one word to my husband about it. If he wants me to go I'll go—even if it's a howling wilderness in an abomination of desolation."

"And it will be, if he sends you up to that mountain farm! I know the place. Tucked in a cranny behind the Catskills—and nothing to it but mosquitoes and hooked rugs! But don't you worry, my angel butterfly—you won't have to go. In the

first place, His Majesty will probably never think of it again. He says a thing like that and then other matters push it out of his mind and he forgets all about it."

"He's a great man, Lamb."

"He is, for sure. And a great actor. But all great men are queer—now, could anything be queerer than his taking you into this house like this and never so much as giving you an admiring glance?"

"I don't want his admiration," the brown eyes looked wistful, "only, Lamb, I don't want to bother him. Help me, Lamb dear, won't you, not to bother him? If he really wants me to, I'll go to the Hooked Rug place, but if he forgets about it, so much the better. Me, I'd like to stay in New York all summer."

"Then you shall—anyway, till you get enough of it—and then I'll see about it. Leave it all to me, Honey."

As it turned out, Thorndike did forget about the farm and indeed, forgot about Prillilgirl. He was upset about the play that he couldn't get and that he was bent on having.

The more he learned about it from Vane, the more he was positive that no other play could ever be such a perfect medium for his talent, and also that no other living actor could do it justice.

Conceited, Guy Thorndike was, but his conceit

was founded on an expert knowledge of his own merit and ability, and aside from his actor's point of view he saw with the eyes of a shrewd and clever manager, what an enormous hit the play, in his hands, could make.

The alternative, for Dan Larkin to put on the play, would be, in Thorndike's estimation, a disaster. As manager, Larkin was well enough but Jeffreys, the man he would star in it, was incapable of grasping the finer shades of meaning in the plot, as well as unable to play the part of principal as it should be played.

He, Guy, understood to the last degree the author's meaning, and also had inspirations of his own regarding its rendition.

But he knew that no amount of coaxing or pleading would get the play out of Larkin's clutches, and he must manage it in some ingenious way, the which he could not as yet map out. Mallory Vane himself was ready to sell his work to the highest bidder, quite regardless of the fact that Larkin had ordered it—or said he had.

And so, Thorndike was brooding and pondering over the matter to the exclusion of all other considerations.

And so, he forgot all about Mrs. Guy Thorndike and her troublesome presence.

But other people didn't forget her. Especially

was she remembered by Mallory Vane and Dan Larkin, and, perhaps less pleasantly, by Agatha Barr.

For that noted actress had spent all her spare time for a year or more striving to achieve the title that a big-eyed chit of a girl had suddenly snatched from her without warning.

Agatha greatly resented this. Mrs. Guy Thorndike, indeed! That silly upstart! How much better, Agatha thought, could she have graced the name—and the game!

But, as was her custom, she decided to turn the situation to her own advantage, and to this end she went to call on Mrs. Guy Thorndike.

At Webb's announcement of the visitor, Prillilgirl made a face of wry aspect, and then, suddenly changing her demeanor, she said;

"Very well, Webb, bring her right here to me. Stand by, Lambie, will you?"

Willingly enough her devoted caretaker stood by, and sat quietly in the background, sewing, as Prillilgirl rose to greet her caller.

"What a wonderful room!" and Agatha stared in astonishment as she reached the threshold.

The boudoir had been done over to suit Prillilgirl's taste, and was a bower of beauty in palest pink and silver. Great bowls of pink roses stood about and their perfume filled the air.

"Yes, it is pretty," assented Mrs. Thorndike, "sit here, won't you?" She indicated an easy chair, and herself dropped on a cushioned ottoman.

Her manner was polite but in no way cordial. Agatha sensed the strain in the situation and wondered if the chit was going to be more difficult to deal with than she had anticipated.

"You're staying in town late, aren't you?" she said, "hasn't Guy found a place to put you yet?"

Prillilgirl was mad clear through at this. But with a canny sort of inspiration born of the necessity of the moment, she returned, sweetly, "oh, yes, he has found a delightful place, but he hasn't put me there yet. When do you leave the city?"

"Oh, I'm not going away until my plans are settled. You know this play of Vane's—or don't you know anything about Guy's work?"

"Rather!" exclaimed Mrs. Guy, with an expression of all-embracing knowledge on her face. "But my knowledge is sympathetic rather more than advisory. I daresay you can advise him. Are you playing with him next season?"

Now this was just what Agatha was longing to know. If Guy secured the Vane play he would not have her in it—he had said, and her present errand was to get Prillilgirl to plead for her.

If Dan Larkin secured the play, he might put

Agatha in the cast and he might not, but he would certainly put Jeffreys, and the leading lady wanted to play the part with Thorndike.

"I hope to," she replied, "but for some unaccountable reason Guy says the part doesn't suit me."

"Then it doesn't," Prillilgirl said, calmly. "Guy always knows."

"No, he doesn't. That is, he doesn't realize my capabilities. Of course I can play the part. It isn't difficult—only tricky. Now that's what I came to see you about. You help me and I'll help you."

"But I don't need any help. I don't want a part in a play."

"No, but you do want help. You need some one to introduce you to the right people and see that you get started in the right set."

"My husband will look after all that."

"Yes, how will he look after it? Bundle you off to a God-forsaken farmhouse and forbid you to speak to anybody!"

"How do you know?" Prillilgirl was so surprised at Agatha's knowledge of her affairs, that she spoke out before she thought.

"Oh, we all know all about you. Guy makes no secret of his new responsibilities. And of course, you are a millstone about his neck. A very pretty millstone, to be sure, but still a drag."

"I'm sorry to be rude, but I think if you're going to talk in that strain, I'd rather not listen."

"You've got to listen. Don't dictate to me. I am Agatha Barr, and I won't stand any nonsense!"

Miss Barr's black eyes stared at her surprised-looking hostess. The actress was a very beautiful woman. Her black hair was of the lustrous sort and she wore it parted and brushed down on either side after the mode of the Mona Lisa. Her cheeks and lips were artificially reddened, but moderately and artistically done. She was tall and extremely slender, and her imperious eyes flashed at the girl she was trying to impress. And it would seem that the baby-faced young thing before her must be cowed by the other's personality, but she was not.

"And I," she said, "am Mrs. Guy Thorndike, and I won't stand any nonsense, either. Now, Miss Barr, just what is it you want? Don't offer me anything in exchange, for you can't give me any instruction or favor or assistance that I would take. But if I can do anything for you, tell me what it is, and I will see about it."

The dignity of the chit was impressive, and Agatha Barr grew annoyed.

"Better come off that high horse, my pretty Corinne. I may call you Corinne, I suppose."

There was no reply to this, and the speaker went on.

"And don't scorn my assistance. You may yet be very glad to get it. You can make your way with the men, of course, but you will not find the women so easy to deal with."

"What women?"

"The women of your husband's set. They all resent your sudden appearance, and they intend to make it hard for you."

"Hard?"

"You heard me! Yes, hard. You'll see. You little ninny, are you too innocent to know how hard women can make another woman's lot if they choose to? Why, Mrs. Lamb, there, will agree to that."

Not being directly addressed, Lamb made no reply to this, nor did she raise her eyes from her sewing.

"Look at me, ninny," Agatha went on, in a half bantering threatening tone, "are you going to do what I want?"

"What do you want? I've already asked you to be explicit."

"Very well, I will be. I want you to persuade your husband to get that play of Mallory Vane's, to put it on himself, and to let me play the leading woman's part.

"If you can't persuade Guy to do that, do you suppose I can?"

"Of course I suppose so. You're his wife. He picked you up somewhere—he won't tell where, and he fell for your china doll face. Now if you have any sense at all, you can wind him round your finger, and make him do whatever you say."

"Oh, of course I can wind him round my finger and make him do whatever I say." Prillilgirl told this astounding lie with a straight face. "But why should I do this thing you ask? I don't care whether he has you in his cast or not."

"You're going to care!" Agatha leaned forward and her face took on a menacing look. "You—wait a minute—send that maid of yours out of the room. Go out, Lamb."

Mrs. Lamb gave Agatha a mutinous glance and sat still. The two were not unacquainted for Lora Lamb had played many years before her retirement to look after Thorndike's household, and had frequently met Miss Barr.

"Take your work into the dressing room, Lamb, and close the door," said Prillilgirl, quietly, and the woman went.

"Now, Miss Barr, proceed with your arguments."

Agatha waxed furious at the sight of the mocking little smile, and almost shouted:

"Don't you dare stand up to me like that, ninny! Don't you know I can make you or break you!"

"You've implied that before. Just what do you mean by it?"

"I mean that in our crowd, what I say goes. I'm the leading lady off the stage as well as on. Not even your husband can combat my decisions. And if I say you are to be ostracized, you will be. And that will not only be pretty unpleasant for you, but will react against Guy Thorndike in more ways than you can realize or understand. Now, ninny, do you propose to stick to your high and mighty attitude?"

"First, don't think I mind your calling me ninny, —I think it's rather engaging."

"Oh, you do! Well, then answer my questions."

"Forget what they were," and Prillilgirl drummed on the arm of her chair with a disinterested gaze out of the window.

"I'll repeat. Are you going to persuade your husband to let me play in Vane's piece?"

"By no means. Positively not. No. Are you answered?"

"Why not?"

"Because if he wants you in it, he'll have you without my advice. And if he doesn't—I don't either."

"Then you refuse?"

"I do. Positively. Absolutely. Entirely. Are you answered?"

"Yes. And you'll regret this. Do you realize you're making an enemy of me instead of a friend? Do you know what it means to have me for an enemy?"

"It would seem I stand a fair chance of finding out."

Prillilgirl refused to be intimidated. She looked at Agatha with a half quizzical, half mocking smile that infuriated the elder woman. She had expected to find the chit frightened, or, at least, embarrassed, and this cool amused demeanor drove her frantic.

"You do indeed!" she cried. "You and your husband both. He'll suffer more than you will."

Prillilgirl flared up.

"Don't you dare do anything that will annoy my husband!" she said, in a low, tense tone. "But you couldn't anyway. You are only jealous and envious of me and him."

"Jealous of you!" and Agatha gave a short laugh. "Never! Why after a month or so, he won't look at you. You're the type that men tire of soonest! You've eyes and a skin—but you've none of the qualities that hold a man."

"Have you?" asked Prillilgirl, with a pretense of deep interest. "What are they?"

"Brains, talent, charm, temperament, magnetism—"

"Ah—no, I can never hope to acquire those things. The best I can do is to pretend to have them. I can do that pretty well."

"Yes, but it doesn't last if it isn't the real thing."

"How horrible! And when my husband finds out I'm merely pretending, what will he do? Divorce me?"

"Probably. They often do. But don't be stubborn. Just grant my request, and I'll be your friend, and I'll see to it that you have the best times a woman can have."

"See here, Miss Barr, as you have all this charm and talent and all, why can't you manage Guy yourself? Why come to me for help?"

"Because, for the moment, you're his new toy. He adores you—I suppose—"

"What makes you suppose that?"

"Because I know Guy. Whenever he takes a new fancy, all else is forgotten for the time being. He must be crazy about you or why did he marry you?"

"Grant his craziness about me," Mrs Thorndike smiled a wifely little smile, "that doesn't prove that he is so blind to his own interest—to his own life work, as to change his stage plans at my request. And, too, I've no reason to ask him to do so. I

know that he does not think you're suited to the part in Mr. Vane's play, and I wouldn't dream of asking him to put you in it."

"Then take the consequences!" and Agatha rose in wrath, and her beautiful face fairly scowled with anger. "I tell you, I can make your life a burden—I can make you wish you'd never been born! And I can do these things so quietly and so cleverly that no one will see my hand in them."

"Sounds like a magician!" and the big dark eyes looked at her with mock admiration and wonder. "But you see—and I know it surprises you, I'm not afraid of you."

"You will be. You're defiant because you are ignorant. You'll sing another tune before long. I know some things about you, and I shall find out more. You expect to have the world at your feet. You'll find the world turning a cold shoulder instead."

"You mean to spread lies about me?"

"I don't propose to take you into my confidence as to my plans. But I warn you I mean to make you miserable. And what I mean to do, I always accomplish. Think over that, ninny! But it isn't too late to change your mind. Why don't you, Corinne? Why don't you take me for a friend, and let me help you, and then you help me? It would be so much nicer all round. And so much better for Guy."

"May I ask Guy about this? May I put the question up to him?"

"No, you may not! This is between us two. If you tell Guy about it, I shall deny all I've said, and I have reason to think that he will take my word against yours."

"I have reason to think the opposite."

"What is your reason?"

"That I have never lied to him—and I feel sure you have."

Agatha's face turned a dull red.

"You are insulting," she said.

"You have insulted me. I think, honors are about even. Now, if you don't mind, I'm going to ask you to go—because, surely it can give neither of us pleasure or profit to continue this interview."

At that moment, Webb appeared to announce that Mr. Vane was calling.

"I'll see him with you," said Agatha, eagerly. "Let us go down together."

Prillilgirl stared at this sudden change of attitude, but, seeing no way out of it, she went down stairs to the drawing room, followed by her guest.

Mallory Vane greeted them both with his usual courtly manner, and though he had hoped for a tête-à-tête with Mrs. Thorndike, he showed no disappointment.

"You're just the man we want to see," Agatha exclaimed, "We're so glad you happened in. Mrs. Thorndike and I are hoping you will let Guy have your play, and that he can be persuaded that I can play the heroine's part in it. Can't you rewrite some of her lines so that they will suit me a little better? As they are she is a less high-spirited woman than I should want to make her."

"Sorry, Miss Barr, but I can't change that character one bit. She is an inherent part of the play, and all the work of the star hinges on the question of the temperament of the heroine. I don't think it is the part for you, and yet, I do think you could play it if you were willing to sink your own personality in the type I have portrayed. But Mr. Thorndike doesn't think you can."

"Is he to have your play?" Agatha asked, quickly.

"It isn't decided yet. Dan Larkin says he'll sue me if I let any one have it but him. However, I don't think he would have a case against me. He ordered it, to be sure, but there was nothing paid, and no contract signed. So, I hold that I have a legal right to sell it to the highest bidder, and Mr. Thorndike is that, so far. What does he say to you about it, Mrs. Thorndike?"

"He's certain he'll get it," Prillilgirl said, glibly.

Not for worlds would she have these people know that Guy had never spoken to her of the play—or, indeed, of little else.

“I want him to have it—” Vane went on, “and yet, if Larkin insists it’s his, I don’t know just what to do. If Larkin gets it, Agatha, of course the part will be yours.”

“Of course. But I don’t want to play it with Jeffreys—I want Guy.”

“Oh, Guy’s the only one for it. Jeffreys would be lumberly. It’s Guy’s own field—he’d make a whale of a hit. The best thing to do would be to coax Larkin off. There’s no use fighting him—he only gets more obstinate. But I think Guy’s friendship with him ought to count for something. Yet Guy wouldn’t stoop to ask him a favor. Larkin would grant that, when he won’t concede the thing otherwise. So it’s a deadlock, for Guy will never give in.”

“Could anybody except Guy coax Mr. Larkin to give up?” Prillilgirl asked, her big brown eyes eager and anxious.

“You could,” and Mallory Vane stared at her without apology. “I doubt if any one could refuse your coaxing.”

“How can I manage it?” and Prillilgirl looked very serious.

“You come on around to my place now—” Vane said, “around to my studio, and I’ll call Larkin over,

—Miss Barr will come along, too—won't you, Agatha? And I'll get Dan in a good humor, and then you smile on him and flatter him up a bit, and then spring your request. If he doesn't say the play is yours and the world is yours, for that matter, I miss my one best bet! Come along, girls."

Prillilgirl ran for a hat and coat, and soon they were flying along in Vane's car to Vane's studio.

"Where do I come in?" said Agatha. "If Guy takes the play, where am I?"

"Up to you to manage Guy," Vane returned, "or get Mrs. Thorndike to help you, too."

"I think she will," Agatha said. "She seems to be the god in the machine for all of us. You'll be a good sport, won't you, Corinne?"

But Prillilgirl only smiled and looked about as communicative as the sphinx.

"We'll see," she said, "after we get the play away from Mr. Larkin."

Now, it was no part of Agatha's plan to be at this coming conference. There was no rôle in it in which she could shine. If they succeeded in getting the play for Thorndike she hoped she could then persuade him to let her play in it. But it would do no good for her to antagonize Larkin, which might after all, be the result. So she asked to be set down at her own home and promised to rejoin them at the studio a little later. And nothing loth, Vane agreed.

CHAPTER V

THE PLAY'S THE THING

DELIGHTED to have the lovely Mrs. Thorndike all to himself, Vane hurried her to his studio and unlocking the door, ushered her in and closed it again.

"Welcome to my workshop," he cried, gaily, and greatly interested, Prillilgirl looked about her.

The studio was enormous, and was paneled in pale gray, and furnished in black and gold. The effect was striking but not bizarre, and a few bowls of crimson roses gave the needed note of color.

Vane ensconced his guest in a high-backed chair, and announced he would make tea for her.

"Cosier, you know," he said, as he busied himself with the tea things.

He watched her from the corner of his eye, and saw at once that she not only had no fear of him, but she was entirely unconscious of any unconventionality in the situation, and was deeply enjoying the new experience.

"What a wonderful place!" she exclaimed. "Don't think I'm going to stay put in this big chair. I want to look around—at everything. May I?"

"Of course you may. Do anything you like—the place is yours."

"Do you paint pictures as well as write?" she asked, pausing before a big easel and its accompanying paraphernalia of tubes and brushes.

"No—you see, a friend shares these diggings with me. Pete Jessup, he's the artist—I'm the scribbler. But the place is big enough for us both and we're good-natured chaps, so we hit it off all right. You must know Pete some day. He's salt of the earth, and once you see him, you'll promptly forget me."

"Oh, no, I shan't," Prillilgirl flashed him a comradely smile, "I like you too much for that. I like all men—if they're clever and gay—as most of Guy's friends seem to be. I don't much like that Mr. Larkin, but it may be because I don't know him very well."

"No, that isn't the reason; it's because he isn't very likable. You don't need Larkin in your life—leave him out of it."

"All right," she laughed gaily. "Now, tell me all about these queer things and curios and oh, is this the desk where you write? Do you make your wonderful plays here? At this very desk? Do you know I've never seen a real author before in all my life. In fact, I've never seen any celebrity except

my husband. What strange things. The pen seems to be a dagger."

"Yes, I had a fancy to use something of a gruesome effect on this play, because it helps the atmosphere. That is a mediaeval dagger; I had the hilt made to hold a pen, you see, and the sharp blade forms the handle."

"Perfectly awful! How do you hold it without cutting your hand?"

"Easy enough. There's enough of the hilt to grip. And it precludes other people's touching my pen. I hate to have my things used by other people."

"Yes, so do I. Well, I'll never touch your penholder! It scares me to look at it. And did you write all the play with that?"

"Yes—that is, the plot and drafted lines. Then I dictated to a stenographer and she fixed it up into shape."

"Well, you ought to write a thriller with that thing. Is your play a thriller?"

"It is; but it's more than that. I mean more than a cheap thriller. It's a great tragedy. A mediaeval plot in a modern setting. May I read you one or two of the scenes?"

"Yes—but not now. I want to look at the things. This place is like a museum."

"Oh, don't say that. I don't want it to be a

junk heap. Most of the stuff is Pete's. We have things in common—except our penholders and paintbrushes."

"Where is Pete? I'd like to see him."

"He's out—but he may come in any minute. Now, sit down to tea, won't you?"

With practised dexterity, Vane had made tea and toast and drew two chairs up to the well furnished table. The chairs were rather close together but Prillilgirl appropriated one with the frank smile of a child at a tea party, and Vane wondered what Thorndike would say if he could see his beautiful wife alone with another man.

"Where's Guy today?" he asked, casually.

"I don't know." Prillilgirl replied truthfully, not adding that she never did know the answer to that question.

"And we don't care, do we?" Vane murmured, laying his hand on the snow-flake one so near his own.

Prillilgirl looked at him curiously. She seemed interested rather than offended.

He clasped her hand in both of his as he went on talking. His chatter was gay and impersonal, and he said funny things that made her laugh.

She appeared entirely unconscious that he was still holding her hand, and it lay cool and impassive in his grasp.

Then, without embarrassment she drew it away to take a cake from the plate.

He studied her without seeming to do so.

"Never been awakened," he assured himself. "I don't believe Guy ever looks at her. What is the secret of it all? I believe I'll have to teach her a little."

Mallory Vane was quite capable of teaching any woman anything. But he was not quite sure how to go about it in this case. He feared to frighten this lovely child, and, too, like the connoisseur and dilettante he was, he preferred that the affair should move slowly. For affair there should be—on that he was determined.

The cake finished, he again took her hand, with a manner still casual but a little more possessive than before.

"What makes you do that?" Prillilgirl said, with a queer little glance at him. "Isn't that flirting?"

"Why, yes—in a mild, innocent way, I suppose it is. Do you mind?"

"Oh, no, I don't mind—but I'm quite sure Guy wouldn't like me to flirt."

"Oh, he wouldn't object to your flirting with me—I'm his very good friend."

"I know it—and that's why I'm here. You remember I came on business."

"You did! What business?"

"Why to see Mr. Larkin—about the play. Have you forgotten you said you'd get Mr. Larkin over here and I was to ask him if he'll let Guy have your play? You can't have forgotten that!"

"I have, though. I've forgotten everything—"

Something in the big brown eyes that turned slowly toward him made him revise the speech he had intended to make.

"And I'm sorry," he finished, instead. "But I wanted you to have your tea before we began business. Shall I call Dan over now? His office is nearby."

"Yes, do," and seemingly quite satisfied, Prillilgirl smiled again, and again began a tour of interested inspection.

Vane went to a telephone booth, that was built in one corner of the room. It was almost like the regulation public booth, but more ornate and looked not unlike a huge Italian cabinet. Its door was of glass from top to floor, and of a semi-opaque patterned glass that allowed the occupant of the booth to see out, yet those outside could not see in.

"What a strange thing!" Prillilgirl cried. "A regular booth in a room? Do you drop in a nickel?"

"No, it's only for my own convenience. It's soundproof, you see, and if Pete has a bunch of wild animals out there talking I can shut myself in my booth and commune with my own friends by myself!"

"Don't you like Pete's friends?"

"Oh, yes—and our friends are often the same people, but it's good to have a telephone to one's self."

"Like your penholder—"

"Yes, like that. Don't touch it, will you? I'm afraid it might slip and cut you."

Vane smiled at her as he entered the booth and closed the door.

He was a typical Romeo. He had the soft, caressing voice and the soulful, melting eyes of the poetic temperament, and he had a gentle dignity that made for a feeling of safety, which, if not justified by his intent was at least very convincing.

It had not occurred to Prillilgirl to feel afraid of him, he seemed more like a protector than an aggressor, and she moved happily about the big room greatly interested in the innumerable curios and rare treasures that were such novelties to her.

Honestly ignorant of social conventions, fearless and unafraid of social dangers, she was like a child venturing into an unknown land.

From behind the glass door of the telephone

booth Vane watched her. But the booth was so built that its door faced the side wall, and the view from it commanded only a small corner of the room. As she moved about she was outside his vision most of the time.

When he emerged he said merely, that Larkin would show up soon, and then he proved so entertaining that Prillilgirl promptly forgot Larkin and the time flew by on wings.

Too canny to "flirt" with her again, Vane took another tack and talked to her as if she understood and appreciated the art of play writing.

He was surprised to find that she had a wide knowledge of Shakespeare but knew nothing of any other plays.

"You see, Uncle was a Shakespeare enthusiast," she explained. "He taught me to love him, too, and we read the plays together over and over. So I know lots of the lines by heart."

"How would you like to write a play," Vane suggested.

"Oh, I don't believe I could!" but her eyes sparkled at the thought. "Do you think I could?"

"Not alone," he said, judicially, "but in collaboration we could do a wonder! You see, with my experience and general knowledge of such things and your wide acquaintance with Shakespeare's

works, and also, your quick wit and original thoughts, we could work together perfectly. Wouldn't you like to try?"

"Oh, I should! Do you suppose Guy would let me?"

"How would it be not to tell him at first? I mean, do a play and surprise him. Think how pleased he'd be to read a play that you had done for him! We could select a type of hero that would just suit him—."

"Like Hamlet!"

"Yes, and then we could modify and adjust the character and the plot so that it would be just what Guy could do best—"

"Oh, splendid! I could come over every morning."

"Yes—but we must plan it a little more. You see, Pete works here in the mornings—"

"Then you come to my house. Lamb will fix us up a studio—"

"Now, now—don't go too fast—"

"But I can't wait to get at it! And, by good luck, Guy will be going away next week, yachting or somewhere—and we can have a good chance—"

"But Lamb will be there—"

"Oh, of course. And Webb. And, beside, I think Guy is going to send me off to a farm place.

Then, you see, you can come there, wherever it is—and we can work together. I'll get out my Shakespeares tonight and read them over."

The radiant face looked up into Vane's own, until it was only by the most determined effort he restrained himself from snatching her into his arms. But Mallory Vane was not foolish enough to spoil his own game. He fully intended to make this beautiful child love him before he said a word of love to her. He decided she had no love for her husband nor he for her. What were the true circumstances of their wedding, why they were married at all, he couldn't imagine. Nor was he specially interested. She was the most priceless thing he had ever seen, and she should be his, sooner or later, by hook or by crook. He was content to bide his time. And Guy should have his play—on that he was now decided. For anything that would please Thorndike would naturally bring about more opportunities to see his wife.

The play on which he proposed to collaborate was, of course, merely a trap to catch a sunbeam. And the sunbeam would be easily caught if he could hide the whole thing from the sunbeam's guardians.

He had an uneasy feeling that both Lamb and the Thorndike butler were on guard where their mistress was concerned, and he felt pretty sure that

today's visit to his place was undertaken without their knowledge.

Perhaps after all he would better make hay while the sun shone.

He looked at his lovely guest. How would she take it if he gently and very carefully took her in his arms. Would she think it only "flirting"?

Partly because the impulse was fast becoming irresistible and partly because he feared he might never get another chance, he concluded to try it. He knew the wiser plan was to lay siege slowly and proceed by easy stages. But the fresh young loveliness was so compelling and the very innocence of her might be soon put on guard by watchful friends or clever foes.

"I have a copy of Hamlet right here," he said, smiling gayly at her. "Let's sit down here and look it over together. Now, you make yourself comfy in this corner of the davenport, and I'll sit beside you and hold the book while you turn the leaves. There are some good pictures in this edition."

With no sign of objection Prillilgirl cuddled into the corner of the big sofa, and Vane sat down beside her, his arm along the back.

He read aloud a few lines in his low, resonant voice and then, her rapt eager face turned to his, and the nearness of her and the sweetness of her proved too much for him.

He flung the book away and crushed her in his arms.

"You wonderful!" he cried. "You marvel! I never saw anything like you! Give me your lips! Quick!"

Prillilgirl, with a deft, sudden squirm, slid out of his arms and stood facing him.

"My good Heavens! Mr. Vane, don't do things like that to me! I forgot to tell you, I just hate to have anybody touch me. Don't ever do it again."

"Oh, no, of course not!" and with a bound, Vane was off the sofa and had again grasped her, this time holding her so she could not slip away.

"Don't struggle," he whispered, hotly, "it won't do a bit of good. Let me love you—dear, darling baby, let me love you—don't fight."

For Prillilgirl was fighting with all the force, power and energy of an angry kitten.

Suddenly she desisted, and looked up into Vane's face with a new sort of horror dawning in her eyes.

"I didn't understand," she said, slowly, and her lip quivered. "But I'm beginning to. I begin to think it was wrong for me to come here alone."

"You knew it was!" Vane said, and held her closer. "You knew it was and that's why you came. Nobody in this world could be as innocent as you pretend to be. Keep it up, Sweetheart, I like it. Tell me more."

"Take your arms away from my shoulders," she said, quietly, but with an icy note in her tone. She ceased struggling, for there was no slightest use in pitting her atom of strength against the man's embrace.

"Fine!" he laughed low. "Go on, Baby. Go on with your pretty fooling."

She looked at him coolly—seeming more perplexed than afraid.

Then she smiled.

"I have a wonderful scream," she said. "Unless you let me go, at once, I'll give one of my piercing shrieks that can be heard four blocks!"

"Then I'll have to get a pillow and play Othello to your Desdemona," he laughed back. And as she opened her mouth to make good her word, he pressed her face against his breast and only a low gurgle into his coat was heard of her vaunted scream.

But what Vane did hear was the whistle of Pete Jessup as he came along the hall toward the studio.

Muttering a fervent oath, he quickly released Prillilgirl and said, "Pull yourself together—here comes Pete."

She made no attempt to obey his warning, and Jessup flung open the door and strode into the room to confront a wide-eyed, tousled-haired vision, flushed of cheek and short of breath, who was

wringing a pair of tiny hands and stamping a tiny foot.

"I never heard of such a thing!" she was saying. "I didn't know anybody could act like that!"

"Whew!" exclaimed Jessup, "what's it all about? And who's here?"

He looked from one to the other of the pair, but Vane was too angry and disappointed at the interruption to say a word.

"I am Mrs. Guy Thorndike," the vision announced, as she looked about for her hat, "and I'm awfully upset."

"You both seem to be," Jessup returned, surveying Vane critically and chuckling at his discomfiture. "But, pardon me, did I hear aright? Did you say Mrs. Guy Thorndike?"

"I did," and Prillilgirl smiled at his amazement. "And I expect you're Pete—and I'm glad to see you. You won't put your arms round me, will you?"

The look of honest fear precluded any thought of this speech being a piece of coquetry, and Jessup returned,

"Certainly not—unless you invite me to."

"Oh, I shan't do that. You see, I'm collaborating on a play with Mr. Vane—"

"Eh—oh, yes—I beg your pardon. And Mr. Vane forgot himself?"

"Well, he seemed to forget everything else, but I think he remembered himself. It's all such a pity, for I wanted to do the play—and of course, I can't come here if he's going to cut up that way. Guy wouldn't like it at all."

"I'm sure he wouldn't," Jessup concurred. "But, I'll help you out. I'll promise always to be here at the session of playwriting, and I'll further agree to keep Mr. Vane in order."

"Oh, that will make it all right, then; I can see you're not that forgetful sort. Will you stay here a while now while Mr. Vane and I settle on our plot and principal characters?"

"Of course I will. You see, I live here."

"Yes, I know it. You paint pictures, don't you?"

"Yes. Suppose I paint a portrait of you, while you're doing your collaboration?"

"That would be fine. But I'm not quite sure about it till I ask my husband—Mr. Thorndike. You see, he mightn't approve of the whole scheme."

"Then don't ask him." This from Vane. "You know you agreed we were to do the play and then surprise him with it."

"But that was before you acted so silly. No, I'd be afraid to try it again. By the way, where's Mr. Larkin? I really came to see him."

Pete Jessup was startled. He was of more

chivalrous spirit than Vane, and he began to fear for this pretty child who seemed to be playing with fire.

As a matter of fact, Vane had not called up Larkin at all. His message from the telephone booth was mere pretense.

"Larkin's coming round here right now," Pete told them. "I met him and he was on his way."

"Then, Mrs. Thorndike, you can ask him your question," Vane said, but though he spoke politely, there was an undertone of mockery that caught Prillilgirl's sensitive ear.

She was indignant at Vane, but her primary errand there was in Guy's behalf, and she wanted the playwright's help.

"Don't speak to me like that," and the brown eyes' pleading gaze bowled Vane over again.

"After all," he thought to himself, "there's no harm done. The matter is only postponed. I can regain her confidence easily enough."

So he smiled on her, and promised his help, and in another moment Larkin walked in.

It was a strange scene. The three unconventional, irresponsible, dangerous men, and the exquisite, fragile little human blossom, in such danger as she couldn't even imagine.

But the old principle of safety in numbers held good here, and Prillilgirl was safe from each of

these hungry wolves, because each one was watched by the other two.

Meanwhile each vowed, secretly, that he would seek and secure interviews with Mrs. Guy Thorndike, at which no third person should be present.

"You see," she was saying to Larkin, eager to make the most of this coveted interview, "my husband wants Mr. Vane's play terribly—oh, terribly. And we thought, Mr. Vane and I did, that you would let Guy have it."

"But I don't wish to let Guy have it—" Larkin's eyes were fixed on the pleading face, and his tone clearly implied that his wish could be changed, if inducement were forthcoming.

"I know you don't, and the brown eyes clouded a trifle, "but we thought, Mr. Vane and I did, that you might be persuaded—"

"Oh, yes—I could be persuaded—"

"Then, persuade him, Mr. Vane," she clapped her hands. "Oh, goody. Hurry up, Mr. Vane—persuade him!"

"No," Larkin watched the play of emotions on the girl's face; "no, it is not Vane who is to do the persuading—it is you, Mrs. Thorndike, you, yourself."

"Oh, all right. Then, Mr. Larkin, dear Mr. Larkin, if I ask you very prettily, will you give me the play for my husband?"

"Well, I can't decide such a big question off hand. You come round to my place with me, and we'll have a confab—"

"She'll do nothing of the sort!" cried Jessup, angrily, and Vane glared at Larkin.

"Larkin only smiled meaningly as he looked from one to another of the men.

"Small choice in rotten apples," he remarked, bluntly, and then said, with extreme deference, "Mrs. Thorndike, I have my car here. Suppose you let me drive you home, and we'll see about this play matter some other time."

"I have an errand over that way—I wish you'd give me a lift, Dan." Vane spoke with a touch of menace.

"Me, too," chimed in Pete. "Your big car will hold us all. Are you ready, Mrs. Thorndike?"

And it was Pete who escorted her downstairs and handed her into the car.

And it was Pete, who, after Prillilgirl had been courteously and safely landed at her home, who wondered what he was going to do about it.

The others didn't wonder—they knew.

CHAPTER VI

WHAT WAS THE TRUTH?

BY THE time Webb opened the door to Prillilgirl's ring, the car had gone on and her arrival caused no comment. She came and went as she chose, her errands being usually shopping or a walk in the park, or along the Avenue.

She went to her own apartment and sat down to think things over.

Vane's outburst had surprised her, but it had not frightened her. She knew in a vague, general way that men—some men—were like that, and her chief regret was that the man she was to collaborate with had that reprehensible tendency. But that very nice Pete person had agreed to be present at the collaborations and to keep Vane in order. So that matter was settled.

The thought of writing a play for Guy absorbed her. Surely he would like that—surely that would turn his thoughts to her, and perhaps he might come sometime to love her. For that was Mrs. Guy Thorndike's ambition that some day her husband would awake to her charm and worth and would give her at least a bit of the love she wasted upon him.

For she so adored the stern, silent man that she spent hours in rapt contemplation of his greatness and in hope of some day capturing his interest.

Guy knew nothing of this, he paid no more attention to her than to the under servants. Occasionally he asked her to appear in the library or drawing room to meet some of his friends, but after the session, he let her severely alone again.

He was never harsh or unkind to her, he simply did not recognize her existence. But she did not resent this, for, as she remembered, it had been so nominated in the bond.

Her innocent schemes for attracting his attention all failed; her lovely gowns and hats he never noticed; her pretty little songs, warbled in a dainty, childlike voice, only brought a message to close her doors.

But she did not despair. She still hoped and plotted toward a future time when he would recognize her merits and return her regard.

Meantime, she was Mrs. Guy Thorndike, and had her place in the world.

To her surprise, as she sat thinking, Guy appeared on her threshold.

Seeing her, he came in without announcement, and dropped into a chair.

He seemed utterly absorbed in himself and his affairs. He didn't even glance at her in any per-

sonal way, but spoke as from the depths of pre-occupation.

"I've had a frightful row with Larkin," he said, "and I expect to have one with Vane. Others are concerned—in fact, everybody seems all fussed up over that play. They will be in and out of here—and oh, Lord, I don't know what may or may not happen. And you must get out of it. I can't be bothered having you about. So, get Lamb to pack your things and start off for the country. Webb will see to tickets and reservations."

Prillilgirl was dismayed. What would happen to her play project?

At least, she must see or telephone Vane as to her whereabouts."

"Where am I to go, Guy?" she asked, quietly, but with a beating heart.

"I don't know the address yet—I've wired two places. One of them will doubtless take you in. It doesn't matter—Lamb will go with you, and stay with you. I hate to spare her from this house—but you can't go alone, or with an irresponsible maid."

"Guy," she smiled at him and her whole soul shone through her great luminous eyes, as she resolved on a bold stroke. "Guy, do you think I could write a play that you would play in—if I had some help, you know."

Thorndike looked at her. In his glance was the pitying commiseration that one might bestow on the village idiot.

Then his annoyance at her very presence irritated him and he grew sarcastic.

"Oh, certainly—of course you could write me a play. And help—why, get Lamb to help you. You can do it while you are up in the country. Now, get ready," he rose to go, "and get off. You can't go tomorrow, I fear, but you will leave early Saturday morning—day after tomorrow. I will tell Lamb about it."

"Yes, Guy. Good-by, Guy."

It was a wistful little face that looked up at him for some word of farewell, but he was looking at his watch, and had no thought for her.

"I ought to hear from these people tomorrow, and you can start Saturday."

Without a further word, he went away, and Pril-lilgirl watched him as he walked down the hall, his free graceful stride commanding her never-failing admiration.

Just for the joy of looking at him, she noiselessly followed, and peeped over the banister as he went down stairs.

"Well, Agatha," she heard him say, as he entered the library, "I told her, and she's going on Saturday."

A lump rose in Prillilgirl's throat. It was bad enough to be exiled from his presence, but it was worse to have it announced to Agatha in a decided tone of relief.

She did not hear Agatha's response, but it was as well, for it was to the effect that they were well rid of the little fool.

Webb heard this speech, being on duty at the moment, and later he retailed it to Lamb.

That astute woman, who was now torn between her devotion to Thorndike and her love for Mrs. Thorndike, merely said, "Drat that woman!"

She had never admired the beautiful Agatha, and now that Prillilgirl had come into the house, she resented the other's presence more than ever.

"That angel child!" she said, "how dare anybody breathe a word against her? She is a fool in the way that Agatha Barr is wise and thank Heaven she is! Oh, Webb, if Mrs. Thorndike knew the truth!"

"She'd die," pronounced Webb, solemnly. She'd positively die. Pray she never knows it."

"It's bound to come out, sooner or later. Do you suppose that Barr cat knows?"

"N—no—I don't think so. Unless Mr. Thorn-dike has told her. And if he hasn't he will—be sure of that."

"Now, don't you go back on Mr. Thorndike—"

"Not a chance of that, Lamb, but he's a queer one, never to look at the little missus. Where's his eyes, I say."

"Well, he's fair worried to death just now about some play that's being made for him—and after that's all fixed up, maybe he'll turn toward her—"

"Maybe he won't. Don't be a silly. The little lady stands no chance at all while the Barr vamp is on the job."

This was Lamb's opinion, too, and she went off with a heavy heart to help her mistress get ready for her trip.

It was Friday morning, the day after Guy's orders about the packing, and while the matter was in progress and the delicate finery scattered about the rooms, Agatha Barr was announced.

"To see me?" cried Prillilgirl in astonishment. "Bring her up, Webb. These things all about won't matter."

"I hear you're going off for the summer," was the way the caller began her conversation," and I just looked in to say good-by."

Now, Prillilgirl was not all kinds of a fool, and she well knew that something lay behind this sudden observance of the amenities.

What it was she had no idea, but intuition told

her it was better to be friendly than to rouse further enmity in the breast of Agatha Barr.

So she chatted in cordial fashion, and as they looked over and discussed various intimate belongings and choice bits of Prillilgirl's wardrobe, her always generous spirit asserted itself and she offered Agatha some of her prettiest things.

Clothing of course would not fit, but she gave rather lavishly of perfumes, laces, handkerchiefs and a few pieces of pretty but inexpensive jewelry.

"I've such a lot of stuff," she said, half apologetically, "and I can't carry everything. Nor do I need such a lot where I'm going."

Agatha was that sort of woman—not a rare sort—who is ever ready to accept gifts. By no means poor herself, she had the trait of acquisitiveness largely developed, and she eagerly grasped at anything Prillilgirl held out.

But having achieved all she could hope for in the way of largesse she at last divulged the reason for her visit.

"Corinne," she said, seriously, "let's be friendly—I hate to feel you don't like me—"

"But I don't," and Prillilgirl gazed at her with calm eyes.

"Yes, you do, or you wouldn't give me all these lovely things. And, truly, I want to be friends—"

"What else do you want? What favor?"

"Oh, you know!" Agatha's voice shook with intensity. "You know, Corinne—I want to be in the play with Guy. I must, Corinne. It will ruin my life if I don't get that position. I never wanted anything so much in all my life. Do help me—dear, do! I've been to Larkin, and he won't give up the play to anybody but you—he says so. Now, won't you go round there to see him? Go this afternoon—you're leaving town tomorrow—"

"But that only means Guy would get the play."

"Yes, I know—but I think now, if Guy does get it, I can coax him to let me play in it with him. I'm sure I can if he realizes that I was instrumental in getting it for him. Which, of course, I will be, if you go to Larkin at my suggestion."

"Will you go with me? I'm—I suppose it's silly, but I'm a little afraid of Mr. Larkin."

"He won't do it for you, if I go, too. Don't be afraid of him—he won't eat you."

"N—no."

"Pooh, don't be a foolish baby. He may ask for a kiss as payment but that's nothing. You ought to give him one if he gives you the play for Guy."

"Could I take Lamb along?"

"No, ninny. You must know Dan well enough to know that he wants to see you alone. Dan's a good fellow, but he has an eye for a pretty girl,

and he won't be hard to manage if you smile on him a little."

"Well," and Prillilgirl looked anxiously thoughtful. "Go on home, Agatha, and I'll think it over. If I decide to do so, I'll go there this afternoon, and I'll let you know the result."

After a little further advice and argument, Agatha went away leaving Prillilgirl in deepest perplexity.

She greatly regretted her departure the next day, for she wanted to do all she could not only regarding Vane's great play, but in reference to the play he was to write with her. Thorndike's scorn had only served to strengthen her conviction that she could write one with such an experienced playwright as Mallory Vane to help her.

Her cogitations, long and deep, resulted in a decision to consult Pete Jessup. He was one man whom she knew she could trust. His advice would be sound, generous and kind.

She called him on the telephone.

It was Vane who answered her, but he told her that Jessup would be at the studio that afternoon at tea time, but that he, Vane, had another engagement. He promised to tell Pete to expect Mrs. Thorndike, and assured her that the interview would be for the two alone.

So it happened that at five o'clock, Prillilgirl, in

her lovely summer organdie and broad leafed hat went to the studio alone.

The elevator took her to the top floor and she tapped at the door of the big north room.

It was opened by Vane, who said, gracefully;

"Ah, there you are, Mrs. Sunbeam. Come in."

"Where's Mr. Jessup?" demanded the caller.

"Be here in a minute. Just ran out for some cigarettes."

"I should think a regiment had been smoking in here already! The place is thick with smoke!"

"By Jove, so it is! You see, Agatha was just here, and she smoked like a chimney. I pushed her out, in time for your appearance."

"Did you tell her I was coming?"

"Nay, not so—but far otherwise! I'm to have you all to myself until Pete returns."

Prillilgirl looked uneasy. It was strange for Mr. Jessup to go off on an errand just at the time she was expected.

"Don't worry—he'll be back in a minute. You're not afraid of me, are you?"

"I don't know—" and she looked in his face. What she saw there did frighten her, and she said, impulsively, "yes, I am!"

"You needn't be, and he smiled disarmingly. "I won't hurt you. Now you're here, suppose we

plan our play a little bit. Agatha says you're going to the country tomorrow."

"Yes, and I thought you'd come there sometimes and we could work on it. Lamb will play chaperon——"

"Since when have you decided you need a chaperon? Who has been coaching you in these matters?"

"Nobody. Prillilgirl pursed her rosebud mouth and tried to look like a prim and prudent matron.

Instead, she succeeded in looking like Sir Joshua Reynolds' picture of Innocence, and Mallory Vane was forced to keep a tight grip on his impulses.

He had plenty of time to go slowly, for he did not expect Jessup in at all. In fact, he had never given him Mrs. Thorndike's message, and he had asked for the use of the studio all day until evening. He had Prillilgirl at his mercy now and he knew he should be uninterrupted.

"Well, then," he said, "let's put in a little real work before Pete returns. Sit there, dear, and I'll get a paper and pencil. We'll make a rough draft of our plot and characters, and then we can work it up when I come to see you in the country."

"But I haven't time this afternoon," and the big eyes looked troubled. "I have a matter I must attend to."

"If you're still harping on that play of mine—

you may as well let up. I'm sick of the squabbling over it, and I'm going to sell it to Mortimer—another manager entirely. I shan't let either Larkin or Guy have it. If I give it to either the other will kill me. I hate all such wrangling, so I've settled the matter in my own way. Mortimer's to have it."

"Will he have Guy to play in it?"

"I should say not! Why, those two hate each other like poison!"

"In the theatrical business, everybody seems to hate everybody else."

"Oh, not everybody. I don't hate you—and to prove that, I'm going to show you how much I don't hate you."

Whereupon he took her gently in his arms, but so firmly did he hold her that escape was impossible.

"Don't flutter, little bird," he whispered; "don't bruise your pretty wings. I'm going to love you softly, not rudely. Do you remember Swinburne's lines:

To lull you till one stilled you,
To feed you till one filled you,
To kiss you till one killed you—
Sweet lips if love could kill.

"There, now, don't try to get away—for you just can't. He laughed softly at her futile effort, and

continued to caress her gently, sure that she would at last submit happily to the inevitable.

But he didn't know the girl.

The desperateness of the situation made her canny, and she lay still in his arms, hoping this would make him relax his hold a little and give her her chance.

And it did. Her eyes were closed, and she made no motion, until as he curiously peered into her face, he loosened his hold a trifle.

It was enough. With a spring, she freed herself, and flew across the room.

She paused at his writing desk, and grasped the awful penholder that was made of a dagger.

"Come one step nearer and I'll kill you," she said, and her low, even tones robbed the speech of all melodramatic sound.

The child was gone; a woman, an outraged, insulted woman stood there, ready to defend herself at any cost.

"Drop that thing!" he cried, and there was more anxiety than anger in his voice. "My precious child, I beg you! Just the least slip of your little finger and you may cut yourself badly. It is fearfully sharp! Please lay it down carefully."

"I will not! I shall hold it, and if you come near me again I shall stab you with it. I know

you at last. I was a fool to come here, I see it now. You are a bad man. Where is Mr. Jessup?"

"Gone out of town. He won't be back till after six or later."

"You didn't tell him I was coming here to see him?"

"I did not. Do you suppose I'd pass up such a wonderful chance to see you alone. Please, darling, put that thing down. I'm not afraid you'll stab me, but I am afraid you'll cut yourself. You don't know what a dangerous thing that is. We call it the Devil's Dagger—it's so deadly sharp. I've warned every woman I know not to touch it."

"Do they all want to touch it—as a means of defense—as I feel obliged to do?"

"You need no defense from me. Just tell me honestly that you don't want me to make love to you, and—"

"And you won't?"

"And—I'll see about it. But you'll have to convince me. I'm not sure yet you're not playing with me—coquetting—egging me on—"

"Then I'll tell you what we'll do. You stand still where you are, I'll hold this dagger until I can reach the door, and then I'll leave it on that table by the door, as I go out."

"But that plan doesn't please me one little bit.

Nor will it prove anything. Put down the Devil's Dagger, and let me come near you just once more; I promise not to touch you—but let me plead my cause, let me tell you what I'll do for you—for Guy—if you'll smile and be friendly. Hush! Some one's coming! Don't make a sound!"

Finger on lips, Vane motioned her to be silent, and they heard a knock at the door.

Both the occupants of the room remained silent, and the knock was repeated. Vane made no move toward the door, and a petulant voice called, "Oh, bother Mallory, let me in a minute. I hear you there. I heard what you said last. I only want to see you a minute—no matter who's there. Let me in.

"It's Thorndike!" Vane exclaimed, awake to the sudden danger and thinking quickly.

"In a minute," he called out, and then with noiseless steps, he led Prillilgirl to the telephone booth, opened the door and fairly thrusting her inside, he softly closed the door again, and went over to the hall door.

He knew the booth was sound proof, if the girl gasped or cried it could not be heard. He felt sure Guy would show no undue curiosity. Even if he suspected Vane had somebody hidden, he would

never think it was his own wife, and would make no comment.

Sure enough, as Vane opened the door, Thorndike entered, gave one glance around and with lifted eyebrows looked toward the closed door of Vane's bedroom.

He shrugged his shoulders. Vane's affairs were none of his business.

"I'll stay only a few minutes," he began, "but I want to settle that matter of your play. I'm bound to have it—"

He broke off suddenly. "That's my wife's hat!" he exclaimed, staring at a rose-decked leg-horn that lay on the floor, near the big Davenport. "How did it get here?"

Prillilgirl, listening through a tiny crack, where she had cautiously opened the door of the booth, saw nothing, but heard the men speak.

"It was," and quick-witted Vane laughed, "but she gave it to Agatha. Agatha was here this afternoon, and fearing a shower left the hat here till tomorrow. She said your wife gave her quite a lot of her things."

"Yes, she told me she did," and Thorndike seemed satisfied.

Prillilgirl, listening, knew that he must mean

Agatha told him, for she certainly had not done so herself.

As Thorndike moved toward her side of the room, she shut the booth's door tight, thereby shutting out all sound.

Nor could she see the two men, but the late afternoon sun cast long shadows and, fascinated, she watched through the patterned glass, and soon saw that the altercation was growing serious.

The two men, she saw by the shadows, were at Vane's desk, doubtless quarreling over the play. Then, horrified, she saw the shadowy arm of one reach out for the Devil's Dagger, but whether on evil bent, or merely to use the pen to sign a contract, she could form no idea. She strained her small body flat against the glass in an endeavor to see the men themselves, but the side of the booth hid them effectively. All she could see was their shadows, and it seemed to her that they were threatening one another.

The day was a warm one, the booth was small and very close—these conditions, added to the stress of excitement and fear, proved too much for Prillilgirl, and she lost consciousness, and fell in a crumpled heap on the floor.

CHAPTER VII

PETE'S PROCEEDINGS

PETE JESSUP came back to New York rather earlier than he had expected, and reached the house shortly after six o'clock.

He took it for granted that Vane was or had been entertaining a caller, and as he neared the door of the studio he listened for voices.

If he gathered that his presence would be unwelcome, he intended to go away quietly. The two friends never interfered with one another's affairs if they could help it.

But Jessup heard no sound at all, and he concluded that the visitor had left and that Vane had also gone out.

Whistling softly to himself he put his key in the lock and turned it. It was still daylight, and he saw at once the inert form of Mallory Vane huddled down into the large high-backed chair in front of his desk.

Jessup sprang forward, and gazed with widening eyes at the crimson-stained shirt front, from which protruded the penholder hilt of the Devil's Dagger.

For an instant his brain seemed paralyzed and then thoughts came racing.

With lightning-like rapidity, his mind suggested suicide—not Vane! Accident? absurd! Murder? who? why? Who had been to see him? When did it happen? What ought he to do? Doctor? Yes, of course. Police? Later—after the doctor came—what doctor?

Pete had had no occasion to consult a doctor since he had been in New York, and knew of none definitely. Nor had he ever heard Vane mention one.

Meantime he was staring about the room, now and then his eyes returning to that gruesome figure in the chair.

He saw the rose-garlanded hat, and his surmises were directed toward the caller he had assumed.

But he didn't connect her with the murder—that thought was too monstrous. He glanced at the desk. It was piled with an untidy mass of letters and papers. It was always like that.

Gingerly, and avoiding the bloodstains, he managed to feel of Vane's heart. It was still, and the flesh was cold to his touch.

"I must get busy," he told himself, shaking his head in dislike of his impending duties.

Big-hearted, big-bodied Pete, the merry, happy-go-lucky artist was out of his element. Detective work had no appeal for him. Mysteries didn't intrigue him, death was a horror to him, and his chief wish was to get away.

But duty to his chum forbade any shirking of responsibility, and he dropped into a chair for a moment to decide what to do first.

"Guess I'll call up the office and ask them to send for a doctor," he thought. "Or shall I call the police first—poor Mal is dead—a doctor can't help him. Or shall I call the office and ask advice? Yes, that's what I'll do.

He crossed to the telephone booth and opened the door.

A low moan greeted his ears, and two anguished brown eyes looked up at him.

Staring, stunned, at the crouched figure on the floor of the booth, he reached out his long, strong arms and picked up the trembling little form.

"Mrs. Thorndike!" burst from his amazed lips, and he carried her to the big divan and laid her down on it.

"Oh!" she gave a stifled scream, as she caught sight of Vane, "is he—is he dead?"

"Yes," and Jessup stepped between her and the awful sight. "What are you doing here?"

"I don't know—oh, I don't know—can't I go home?"

"Go home? You *must* go home! And quick, too! How can I get you away? Oh, Lord, what a mess! When did you come? Did Vane annoy you?"

"Yes—oh, yes, he did!" and with the admission evidently came remembrance, and with a tired sigh, Prillilgirl fainted dead away.

Then Jessup became very calm. Faced with a fearful new responsibility, and that to the living, not to the dead, his mind became alert and his brain active.

He hurried to his bedroom and returned with smelling salts. Then he mixed a stiff dose of brandy and water, and armed with these he brought the girl back to consciousness.

"Brace up," he said, firmly, as he shook her lightly in his efforts to revive her. "Be brave, now, and listen to me and do exactly as I tell you. I don't want to ask you any questions, I don't want to know anything. I just want to get you out of here and home safely. Will you help me? Will you do the best you can?"

His straight glance and his deep serious tone seemed to carry weight, and with a shudder of apprehension, she returned, "Yes, Pete, I'll do whatever you say."

"That's a good girl. Now keep quiet a minute, while I think."

His blue eyes gazed at her solemnly, as he went on. "You're in grave danger, and if I get you through it will be by a miracle. But you must get

out of this before you are seen. Is this your hat? Put it on."

Like a child she obeyed, and the flowered hat above the lovely troubled face made a picture that would have set Jessup raving at any other time. Now, he didn't even see it.

"I'll send you home in a taxi——" he said; "No, that won't do. I'll take you myself—how can I leave here? Oh, what can I do? My Heavens, child! Look at your hands!"

She held up her hands and gazed at them piteously. They were unmistakably stained with blood. And there were crimson stains on her pretty frock.

"Come into the bathroom," he said, peremptorily.

He led her in, and with clumsy fingers, but with the efficiency of determination he cleansed her hands and did the best he could to eradicate the stains from her dress.

"Will this stuff wash?" he asked.

"Organdie? Yes. But I'll have it cleaned."

"Don't. On no account send it to a cleaner's. Don't do anything about it. I think I've washed it so they don't show. Let me look."

He inspected her carefully, and seeing no more stains he dabbed with a bath towel until the wet spots were dry.

"Is this your hatpin?" he asked, picking one up from the glass shelf beneath the mirror.

"Yes," said Prillilgirl, eyeing the rhinestone acorn half-dazedly.

"Stick it in your hat, then. Now are there any more of your belongings here?"

"No."

"Sure? Look about well? This is your cigarette holder?"

"No, it's Agatha's."

"So it is. Come now—I've got to get you home some way. I say, is your maid at home? That good one you have—what's her name, Lamb?—Mrs. Lamb?"

"Why, yes, I suppose she is."

"Well, she must meet us somewhere. We'll go and meet her. What's your own private telephone number?"

She told him and he went to the booth and called it.

As he waited, he looked round at what he could see of the studio. He noted nothing unusual, except a copy of the *Evening Telegram*. This must have been brought in by somebody, for the studio dwellers didn't read an afternoon paper. It seemed to argue a man caller, and somehow it comforted Jessup's heart.

He came back to Prillilgirl. She was bravely fighting off hysterics.

"Don't give way," he said, kindly, seeing her efforts. "Keep hold of yourself—it'll come out right. Come with me, now."

He led her through the door, which he snapped shut behind him, and took her down by the stairs, not the elevator.

In the street, he walked her rapidly for a few blocks and then hailed a taxi.

"Forty-second Street and Broadway," he said, "Northeast corner." On the way he gave her further instructions.

"On such a busy corner you won't be noticed," he said. "Mrs. Lamb will meet you there and will take you home. Deny having been at our studio today. Say you went to a picture gallery or shopping or anything—but on no account say you saw Mallory Vane. Understand?"

"Can I do that?" and Prillilgirl looked at him with an understanding but uncertain expression on her sweet, troubled face.

"You must! You have native wit, ingenuity, a certain cleverness, now use them in this emergency. Make up a story of where you have been, and—stick to it. Don't waver from your first account. Now, I must leave you with Mrs. Lamb. Remember, stick to your first story—whatever happens."

At the appointed corner, Prillilgirl was transferred to the care of the waiting Lamb, who was greatly amazed, but calm and collected.

"Take Mrs. Thorndike home and put her to bed," Jessup said. "She has had a slight attack of heat prostration. Just a little overcome by the high temperature and humidity. Don't bother her with questions—put her to bed, and if necessary give her a little sedative. Good-bye, Mrs. Thorndike. Keep her in the house and out of the sun for a few days."

He returned to the cab, leaving the two on the corner, for he deemed it wise to get back home as quickly as possible, and he knew the capable Lamb could take care of her mistress.

On the way back he did a lot of quick thinking, and as he left the taxi a few blocks from his home, he stopped for one brief errand and then walked briskly along and into the house as if just returning from his day's trip.

"Hallo," he said to the man at the desk. "Broiling day, isn't it?"

"It isn't so much the heat," the clerk began, "it's the——" But Jessup was on his way upstairs—by the staircase, not the elevator.

Back into his rooms, he found all as he had left it. The horrible, still figure of Mallory Vane was slumped in the chair and the evening paper was still

on the window seat where it had been thrown by somebody.

Swiftly, Pete set to work. From his pocket he took a cigar, the purchase of which had been his errand on his way home. This he lighted and began to smoke.

He subjected the telephone booth to a close scrutiny. On the shelf and on the instrument itself he discerned some small blood stains and many fingerprints. With a damp cloth from the bathroom, he removed these, and then picked up the telephone book from the floor where it had fallen.

To his utter dismay this showed many scarlet stains and small red fingerprints. Clearly, the poor child had tried to find a telephone number after—after—he couldn't word it, even to himself. Mallory must have been brutal to her!

But something must be done about the telephone book. It must not be found by the police—and yet, a book must be ready if they should ask for it.

He hid the book in the bottom of his own trunk and then going out into the hall, he listened at one or two doors, and finding one room in which he heard no sound, he stepped in and took the telephone book he found there. Few of the artists kept their doors locked, and he could think of no other plan.

Returning he put the book in the booth and then, taking the evening paper, he scrawled in a large care-

less hand, "Manning 408," and tossed it back where he had found it.

One more thing he had to do. Taking a slip of paper he wrote on the typewriter a short note. It ran:

"Expect me late Friday afternoon. J. Manning."

This he placed on the desk, half hidden by other papers, and then, drawing a long breath, he gave the room another careful inspection and went to the telephone.

"Carter," he said to the house operator, "don't make any stir, but—there's been an accident up here—Mallory Vane is—is hurt. Call in the best doctor you know of, and quick, will you?"

"All right, Mr. Jessup. Shall I come up?"

"Not necessary. But send the doctor up as soon as you possibly can."

There was still time to think. Jessup was worried about that big blue book in his trunk. If the police searched everything!

He looked toward the fireplace. It was littered with papers, cigar stubs, old paint tubes, and all the rubbish thrown away by careless untidy men. It was cleaned out once a week, but just now there was a lot of stuff, and too, a telephone book couldn't be burnt up quickly. Nor could he tear out the incriminating pages, for the stains were on the edges and

had blurred many leaves. No, he must keep that until such time as he could manage to make way with it successfully. Surely the police would not search his belongings. There could be no thought that he had killed Mallory. He had set his stage too well for that, he was sure.

The cigar he was smoking, vastly inferior to his usual brand, was now about half consumed. He put it out and laid it on the side of an ash tray on the desk. Then he drew up a second chair to the desk, placing it as it might have been if used by a man calling on Vane.

Then, his watchful eyes still scanning the room, he sat and waited.

The doctor came, a bustling, wiry little man, with an eager interested face and black eyes of the type called gimlet.

Jessup squirmed at sight of him. He had hoped for a big absent-minded duffer, whose eyes were adapted to wool-pulling."

"I'm Peebles," he said, "Doctor Peebles—good Lord, is the man dead?"

"Yes," returned Pete, "he's Mallory Vane—he shares this studio with me. I just came home, and found him as you see him. I haven't touched him, except to feel his heart. Has he been dead long?"

Peebles looked at the speaker. The young man

was certainly very glib. And artists were a lawless lot. Well, he must go slowly.

"You were good friends, you two?" he asked, with a casual air.

"You bet we were. We've lived here together for nearly four years and never had a scrap of any sort."

"Yes—yes—I see. What a murderous weapon! What do you know of it?"

"It is Mr. Vane's property," said Jessup, a little curtly, for he did not like the aggressive manner of the man.

"Well, I think we won't touch it, for there may be finger prints on it. Queer thing—a pen—isn't it?"

"Yes, it's the pen Mr. Vane always wrote with. Can it be a suicide, doctor?"

"Possibly, as far as the blow of the dagger is concerned. Had he any reason for wanting to end his life?"

Jessup almost smiled at this. No man he knew had a greater love of life than Mallory Vane. No one he knew had more to live for in the way of worldly pleasures. A successful playwright, rich, handsome, courted and flattered by all, a prime favorite with women, a care-free, joyous nature—no, there could be no reason for his suicide.

But Pete said, "I don't know of any reason, but one doesn't know all that's in a man's private life."

"No, of course not. Well, we'll have to call in the Medical Examiner and he'll bring the police, and I'll turn things over to them. You live here, you say?"

"Yes, I'm Peter Jessup, an artist. I'll stay here, I suppose. That is—they'll take——"

"Oh, yes, we'll get the remains away tonight, I daresay. Where's the telephone? My, what a queer arrangement. Just like a public booth. Drop a nickel?"

"No, it's merely a sound-proof booth for our mutual convenience."

"Oh, I see. Where's the book?"

Pete blessed his forethought that had provided an unstained book, and lighting a cigarette, he sat tight and waited.

"Got any suspicions?" asked the doctor when he came out of the booth.

"Why, no; that is, nothing definite. But I'd rather wait until the detectives come before I talk. You see, this sort of thing is a new one to me, and I don't know just what my procedure ought to be."

"Nothing very new to me," vouchsafed the other. "I've seen many a murder victim. But I

vow I never saw such a queer weapon. Used it for a regular writing pen, you say? Wonder he didn't cut himself all to pieces!"

"No, he never even scratched himself with it. And as he never allowed anyone else to touch it, there was no harm done."

"Somebody touched it this time, all right. And there was sure harm done. Now, who did it?"

"I'll tell you who I think did it," and Jessup seemed suddenly decided to talk. For it had occurred to him that if he could imbue the doctor with his own theory it might help with the police later on.

"I think it must have been a man named Manning, who came to see him this afternoon."

"Manning? Do you know him?"

"No, never heard of him before. But while I was waiting for you I looked about and here's this note on the desk. See, it says Manning was to call this afternoon. Then, here's an evening paper marked 'Manning 408,' evidently a room number in some hotel. We never have an evening paper, so that was left here by some visitor, you see. And, lastly, here's a half-smoked cigar on this ash tray, of a totally different brand from any Mr. Vane or I ever use. So, how can I help deducing a caller named Manning, and what else to think but that he was the murderer?"

"Sound," said the doctor, "sound and clear. I believe you must be right—though of course, there may have been other callers, who didn't leave quite so many evidences of their visit."

"But we'll leave all that to the detectives. They'll know what to think."

"Yes, of course," Pete tried to speak casually.

At that moment Pete Jessup was conscious of only one thing. He had a mad, a burning desire to get over to that still figure of Vane and to wipe with his handkerchief any telltale fingermarks that might be on the hilt of that shining dagger. The hilt, remodeled to a penholder, still held a pen black with dried ink, and incongruous enough it looked protruding from the breast of the dead author. Almost as if some grim caricaturist had drawn a cartoon of a man stabbed with his own professional sign manual.

Pete racked his brain for an excuse to go near the dagger—even had his handkerchief held carelessly ready—but the piercing eyes of the alert doctor followed him with warning glances. And once he even said, "Don't touch anything on the desk—or on the body, Mr. Jessup. It's against the law, you know."

Small respect had Pete for the law, but as he edged nearer to Vane the spry little doctor jumped

up and came over to him, and gently but very decidedly pushed him away.

Jessup had no desire to be definitely suspected of any connivance and strolled away across the room.

Then he had an inspiration. In his bedroom he arranged a tempting tray of bottles and glasses.

Returning to the studio, he threw himself in a chair in an attitude of deepest dejection, and said, "I'm all in, Doc. I just took a little bracer. If you'd like one, go in my bedroom there, and help yourself."

But the ruse didn't work. The doctor declined the invitation and continued to hold the fort.

Pete's brain worked rapidly. The detectives would arrive soon, and if they found a woman's fingerprints on that dagger! If they should prove to be—oh, something must be done about it.

He considered taking the doctor into his confidence and asking his help. But that plan was too dangerous and might prove a boomerang and return on the head of the very one he was trying to shield.

As a last resort he tried a desperate measure.

He went into the telephone booth and closed the door. The doctor could not hear him now.

Calling Carter, the man at the desk downstairs, he said: "See here, old man, do this for me, will you, and keep it under your hat! In about one min-

ute and a half ring me up. Whoever answers, just say, 'Mistake, 'scuse it, please,' and shut off."

"Righto, Mr. Jessup. It's as good as done. G'by."

Pete came out, closing the door behind him, and again threw himself down in the easy chair, and closed his eyes.

In a moment the telephone bell sounded.

"Please answer it, Doctor Peebles, won't you? If it's anybody for me, say I'm out. I can't have anybody butting in here now."

He knew that the doctor, when in the booth, even if he left the door open could not see him around the corner, and he would have a chance to wipe the dagger hilt clean while the connection was being made.

He waited with bated breath to see how the doctor would respond, and could have screamed with relief when he rose and stepped briskly over to the telephone booth.

Pete planned to rise from his chair at the same instant the doctor took up the receiver, but to his utter despair, even before that happened the doorbell rang a peal, and the doorknob was noisily turned.

It was the police, of course, and even as Pete rose, Doctor Peebles, the telephone call forgotten, sprang to open the door.

CHAPTER VIII

POLICE INVESTIGATION

LAMB put her little mistress into a taxicab with much the same air as a mother would show when tucking her baby into its perambulator.

"Don't try to talk, deary," she said, as they started homeward, "you're done up completely. It has been an awful hot day, and I don't wonder you collapsed. We'll soon be home and I'll fix you up fine."

Prillilgirl said nothing. Her big eyes stared ahead without expression of any sort. She was more than dazed, she was fairly numbed with unbearable horror. Also, the weather was still stiflingly hot and her head ached. She clasped her hands tightly together in her efforts to preserve her self-control and now and then sighed deeply, long quivering sighs that pierced the heart of kindly, anxious Lamb.

But at last Prillilgirl was at home and after a cool bath and a refreshing iced lemonade, she found herself resting in her own bed with her head on her own soft lace pillow.

But the very relaxation brought back her

thoughts, rushing, and she burst into such uncontrollable weeping that Lamb became really alarmed.

Great sobs shook the huddled little form, she shivered as with a violent chill.

"Give me something, Lamb," she cried; "give me some veronal, or anything that will make me sleep—make me forget——"

Lamb had repressed her natural curiosity and had asked no questions, but this speech startled her, and she said, "Forget what, dear?"

"All—everything—everybody—oh, what *shall* I do?"

"Don't do anything, now. Just try to sleep. Yes, I'll give you a little dose of veronal—you must sleep, or you'll be ill."

"I am ill—I shall always be ill—always—always—I can never forget—never——"

The astute Lamb forbore to question further and administered a light sedative, which after a time produced the desired effect.

It was nearly midnight when Prillilgirl woke to find the faithful Lamb watching by her bedside.

"I'm hungry," she said, simply, and Lamb brought warm milk and biscuits.

She sat up in bed, nibbling at the food, her face still wearing its dazed look, but her voice and manner were firm and determined.

"Lamb," she said, "I'm all right now. I was overcome, you see, by the heat—and it sort of affected my head, do you see?"

"Yes, Mrs. Thorndike," said Lamb, taking her cue quickly.

"Yes. That's all that ailed me. I had been to—to a picture exhibition and looking up at the pictures is so tiresome, you know."

"Yes, ma'am. It catches you in the back of your neck."

"Yes, that's what it does, and it wears you out. And the walking about is very tiring. And the heat! Well, all together, it was too much for me, and I had what I suppose you would call heat prostration."

"Yes, ma'am, that's what I'd call it."

"Yes. Well, it's all over now, and I'm as fit as a fiddle."

The still bewildered-looking eyes and the trembling lips gave the lie to this statement, but the poor child was making a desperate attempt to carry out Jessup's orders.

"All the time I was out," she went on, "I was at that picture show. I didn't go anywhere else at all. Not anywhere else, Lamb."

"No, ma'am, not anywhere else."

"You believe that, don't you, Lamb?"

"Oh, yes, ma'am, of course I do."

"Then that's all right," and with a tired sigh Prillilgirl sank back on the pillows and fell asleep from sheer exhaustion.

Lamb looked at her curiously. The woman was uncannily wise, and, moreover she knew this transparent young nature through and through.

She knew at once that the picture gallery story was false, but she could conceive of no reason for its fabrication. Where had the child been? What had she been doing? Who had been with her?

But she was now sleeping quietly, and apparently restfully, so Lamb went to her own room, which was nearby, and went to bed herself.

The evening had been eventful in the Vane studio.

When the police came they took possession of the place. There were three of them, the Medical Examiner, who paid all his attention to the victim of the crime, and conferred with Doctor Peebles as to the details of the case.

Then there was a Sergeant, whose belligerent air and morose, accusing countenance struck terror to the heart of Pete Jessup.

But even more terrifying was the third man, a detective, who was not only a sleuth officially, but who seemed possessed of a personal interest and an eager zest in nosing out evidence or clues.

This enthusiasm was really due to the fact that young McGee had never had a chance at a real murder case, only robberies and arson having fallen to his lot heretofore.

At last, he thought, he was to have a chance to prove his wizardry, his almost superhuman powers of deduction and detection and make a name for himself that should be heard at least part way round the world.

The Medical Examiner, Doctor Gleason, found no complications in the method of the fatality.

Vane had been instantly killed by a swift blow of the sharp slender blade of the Devil's Dagger.

"A wicked piece of furniture," he said, holding the instrument gingerly between his thumb and forefinger. "Only a freakish mind would conceive of using such a thing for a penholder."

"Vane did have a freakish mind," Jessup defended, "but he was entirely sane and normal."

"Nobody questioned that," snapped Gleason, who hated to be interrupted. "Also, the hilt is covered with fingermarks—doubtless those of the murderer superimposed on those made by the user of the thing as a pen."

"I thought murderers always wore gloves," Pete put in, again bringing down a reprimand on his head.

"Be good enough, sir," Gleason said, pompously, "to let me make my report. This dagger was lunged at the victim swiftly, with a quick, unerring stroke, showing a cool hand——"

"Or else blind, hot-headed passion," interrupted McGee coolly.

"It may be," Gleason took this casually. "But the blow was instantly fatal, and without doubt, unexpected."

"How do you get that?" asked McGee.

"Because there are no signs of a struggle, no sign that Mr. Vane was trying to defend himself or to ward off a blow. As you see, he is sitting naturally, save that he slumped down a bit as he lost consciousness."

"Then that's that," chirped the irrepressible McGee. "Now, to find out who did it, and that's my province."

"Excuse me, Mr. McGee, I've no wish to intrude on your province, but neither must you do so on mine. As Medical Examiner, it devolves on me to make a preliminary inquiry into the circumstances of the case, and I propose to do so, right now."

"Tonight?" asked Pete in dismay, for he had thought of more matters he wished to attend to."

"Yes, tonight. And now. And to begin with

Mr. Jessup, will you tell me all you can about the whole affair? ”

“ Certainly,” and Pete detailed the manner of his home coming and the discovery of the crime. “ But I thought it might be a suicide,” he suggested.

“ No, it is not. The direction of the dagger, and the position of the victim’s arm and body preclude such a theory. Go on, Mr. Jessup. You came in about seven o’clock? ”

“ About that. I never know the time. I had been up to Bronxville to a party, a coming-out tea for my niece, and I hurried home to dress for an evening engagement. By Jove, I forgot all about that!” he scowled ruefully.

“ Well, when I saw Vane, I was bowled over, of course. But as soon as I could pull myself together, I looked around a bit, and then I called in Doctor Peebles. I didn’t know what else to do. I’m not up in this sort of thing.”

“ Ah, yes—I see.” Doctor Gleason was suave. “ And what did you find when you ‘ looked around a bit ’ ? ”

“ I’ll tell you,” and Pete became more animated. Here was his chance to steer suspicion in the direction he wished.

He told with enthusiasm of the caller he declared

Vane must have had. He showed the note or memorandum stating that Manning would call and he called attention to the evening paper, with Manning's name and room number on it.

Doctor Gleason listened, interestedly, and inquired further of Manning.

"Never heard of him," Pete declared, but Vane and I had lots of separate friends. Maybe he was a creditor—though Vane had money enough. Oh, he wasn't a millionaire, but he wasn't strapped, either. Maybe Manning is a down-and-out actor, and thought Vane would get him a job. I've no idea who he is. But it's clear that he was here this afternoon, and must have been the one who killed Vane."

"Well," Gleason said, judiciously, "he must have been here before seven, when you arrived, and after four, which is the time this edition of the paper is out. But we don't know that nobody else was here during those hours."

"Somebody was here reading Hamlet," McGee said, picking up a volume that was laid open and face down on the Davenport. "I'll just freeze onto this, it's a shiny leather cover and shows finger prints finely. Now, if we can make out Manning a Shakespeare lover, and if we can find his finger

prints on the cheap cigar and on the evening paper, all we've got to do is to walk out and find our Manning."

Pete Jessup resented the young detective's cocky tone, but more than that he trembled at the thought of the prints they might find on the book. For he well knew who read Hamlet with Vane!

"You people attach far too much importance to finger prints," he said, impatiently frowning at McGee.

"Not at all. They're our strong card nowadays. You see even latent finger prints—that means those not visible to the eye—can be brought out and developed as well as the plainer ones. Oh, there's lots of scope for that in this case. And if Friend Manning's prints are on the dagger, that puts the noose neatly round his neck."

"I don't believe everybody leaves prints all over everything," Pete growled.

"Well, murderers do. You see, if anyone is excited or nervous, their hands naturally perspire, and their finger tips ooze out evidence as well as courage, like Bob Acres."

"No robbery, is there?" Gleason asked. "Do you notice anything missing, Mr. Jessup?"

"No, I don't—but I haven't looked. I never

thought of that." He rose and searched about the desk.

"Nothing gone, as I can see. But Vane never kept any valuables about except a few odds and ends of gold pencils, cigarette cases and such. They all seem to be here." He fussed over the heterogeneous muddle on the desk.

"How about money?"

"He kept that in this drawer—see, you press this little knob to open it."

Jessup pulled open a drawer and showed a small pile of bills and a little mound of silver coin.

"That's all the ready money we kept about," he informed; "we used it in common. But, by Jove, this is where Vane kept his play—and it's gone!"

"A play?"

"Yes, a most valuable manuscript—his latest play. We must hunt for that."

But though Pete knew and looked into all the likely places the play could not be found.

"Maybe that's what Manning took," guessed the detective, but Jessup said, "not likely. It's of no use to anyone except Vane—unless——"

"Well, unless what?"

"Why, several people wanted it—to buy it, you know—but of course, no one would kill him for it!"

"Who wanted it most?"

"Oh, two or three managers and actors. Thorndike, the actor, and Dan Larkin, the manager, are both trying to get it, but Vane concluded to sell it to a man named Mortimer, a new producer."

"Well, I'll bet he sold it to Larkin," said McGee, suddenly.

"Why?" asked Gleason, shortly.

"Because I've spotted a find that you all overlooked. See, here on the desk, but slipped under a pamphlet, is a check made out to Mallory Vane and signed Daniel Larkin, for ten thousand dollars, and dated today. How's that?"

"Then Larkin killed him!" fairly shouted Jessup. "There's been bad blood between those two for a long time!"

"Be sensible, Mr. Jessup," admonished Gleason. "Why should Mr. Larkin kill a man who had sold his play to him?"

"But Vane would never sell that play for that price! I knew he would not. He wanted five times that."

"Perhaps this is merely an initial payment," Gleason argued. "At any rate, we must get Larkin over here. Where can we find him?"

Jessup gave two or three numbers that might locate the manager, and at the second attempt McGee nailed him.

"He's coming right down here," he said, as he emerged from the booth. "I say, Gleason, here's a queer thing. There are no finger prints of any sort in that booth. Looks 's if it had been cleaned very recently—ver-y re-cently in-deed!"

His tone was ironic, and his lifted eyebrows gave Jessup a cold shiver down his spine. Yet he was glad he had cleaned up the booth. Better suspicious spotlessness than incriminating spots.

Pete sat silent while waiting the arrival of Larkin. He was rather glad Dan was coming. He might help clear things up and anyway it would give him, Pete, the support of the presence of one of his own kind as against these antagonistic police.

Nor did he realize that the antagonism was entirely of his own making.

Larkin came, and hearing his step, the indefatigable McGee threw open the door to him.

Larkin gave a glance at the scene. "What the ——," he began, and then cut short his irreverent expression in the presence of the dead.

"Dead?" he whispered as he stepped softly toward Vane.

"Yes," said Jessup, bluntly, "murdered."

"What! Who did it?"

"We don't know yet," Gleason took the lead,

"but we're checking up on the visitors Mr. Vane had today, and we called you first."

"Yes, I was here early this afternoon, shortly after lunch. We put through a business deal. Vane was all right then, and in the best of spirits. When did this—this thing happen?"

"About six o'clock, as near as we can judge, It is impossible to say exactly."

"Six o'clock. Can't you find out who was here about that time? Can't the doorman or the elevator man tell you?"

"They've shifted. Not the same ones are on duty now."

"I see." Larkin looked thoughtful. "What are you doing—in the way of investigation?" His tone was slightly accusing and Gleason resented it.

"We're doing all we can, Mr. Larkin. But this is a strange case, and it has to be handled with care."

"With care, yes. But not with damnable dilatoriness! You ought to rout out the servants that were on duty at six. Get their stories. Track down the murderer hotfoot! He'll get away, and by Jove, you deserve to lose him!"

"We're in charge, Mr. Larkin, not you," Gleason reminded him. "Suppose you answer my questions, without giving me orders."

"Fire away."

"What was the business that you and Mr. Vane transacted?"

"I bought a play from him."

"Where is the play?"

"At home, in my safe."

"Was Mr. Vane willing to sell you this play?"

Larkin stared at him. "Certainly he was, or I could not have bought it."

"What was the price agreed on?"

"Those things are not usually made public. I'll tell the authorities if or when it may be necessary. But at present I prefer to say that the price agreed upon was satisfactory to both of us, and that today I gave Mr. Vane my check for ten thousand dollars as a first payment. The total price was considerably more."

"You drew the check while here, or brought it with you?" broke in McGee.

Larkin gave him a cold stare.

"I had my check book with me," he said, "and on the completion of our agreement I drew the check for Mr. Vane right here at his desk."

"Did you use that dagger penholder?"

Larkin shuddered. "I did not!" he exclaimed. "Vane never allowed anybody to touch that, and I, for one, never wanted to."

"And you were here at what time, Mr. Larkin?"

"It must have been between two and three—nearer three, I should say. I rarely know the time, except when I have an appointment to keep. But I'm sure it was near three. The elevator girl can tell you. She brought me up and took me down, too. The pretty one with the bobbed hair."

"Do you know Mr. James Manning?" asked Gleason.

"Not that I remember. I may have heard the name, may even have met him, but I've a poor memory for such things and promptly forget strangers who do not especially interest me. Why?"

"I'll tell you," exclaimed Pete, eagerly, and he proceeded to tell his Manning story for the third time.

He watched the faces of Gleason and McGee more closely than he did Larkin as he expatiated on the probability that Manning was the murderer.

To Pete's satisfaction, Larkin agreed that it might well be that the unknown Manning was the murderer, and was of the opinion that he should be sought out at once.

"But we can't do anything about that tonight," said Gleason.

"Why not?" demanded Larkin. "You got me over quick enough. And it isn't late."

"It's after eleven o'clock."

"That isn't late," Larkin declared. "At any rate you can go through Vane's papers and see if you can get a further line on this Manning. Letters maybe, or telegrams. That slip is merely a memorandum, his secretary might have typed it."

"That's so," and McGee looked at Dan Larkin with a more respectful interest.

"I say, Doctor," and Jessup gave an apprehensive glance at Vane, "can't you—you said——"

"Yes, Mr. Jessup, I understand. Yes, I'll call the undertaker now, and they'll take the body away. To a funeral parlor, I suppose?"

"Why—I suppose so. What do you say, Dan?"

"It's all strange business to me," Larkin returned. "Where are Vane's people, and who are they?"

"I don't know much about them. "They're Middle West. But there's a silly, half-baked cousin, who's everlastingly turning up here, named Roland Ross ——"

"Roly Ross!" cried Larkin, "you don't mean it! That has-been, second-rate actor, a cousin of Mallory Vane?"

"Yes, and his sole heir, if Mal didn't leave a

will. And I don't believe he did, for he's been putting off making one for years."

"Well, Roly must be notified," Larkin said. "Whose duty is that, Doctor Gleason?"

"I rather assumed Mr. Jessup here would look after such matters. Or had Mr. Vane a lawyer?"

"No," Pete said, "he had no lawyer or doctor or minister. He never seemed to feel the need of such things."

"Well, there'll have to be an administrator," declared Gleason.

"I'll notify the cousin person," Pete said, "and you, Dan, see about administration papers or whatever they are. You've more legal knowledge than I have. I don't want to shirk anything I can do for old Mal, but estates and such things are out of my line."

"All right," Larkin said, "I'll take charge until I can hand matters over to the heir. We can soon find that good-for-nothing Roland Ross!"

"Maybe he's the murderer," put in McGee.

"Maybe he is," said Gleason, "but we haven't found any of his tracks yet."

"You mean not that we know of. What's his address, Mr. Larkin?"

"Lord knows, but you can find him through

the Theatrical Bureaus. Down-and-out Club, most likely."

"He won't be down and out when he comes into Vane's stuff," Pete vouchsafed. "Not a colossal fortune, but enough to make a man sit up and take notice."

"I'm going to stay here tonight," announced McGee suddenly. "After the funeral people come for the body, I'll hunt around a bit for clues and I'll go through Mr. Vane's papers. Then, if I want to go by-by, I'll camp down on that big soft sofa thing."

Pete Jessup's heart fell. What might not that sharp-eyed young ferret find out! But to demur would look suspicious, so he said nothing.

"You come along home with me, Pete," Larkin said. "You're pretty well done up, and a night here would give you the horrors. I'll put you up, and we can talk over things a bit." And Pete gladly consented.

CHAPTER IX

MCGEE GETS VERY BUSY

MCGEE was very busy during most of that night collecting his evidence and hunting his clues.

Nor was he unsuccessful. Very carefully he laid aside anything he found on which were or might be incriminating finger prints.

These things included the dagger itself, the small copy of Hamlet, and all the things that pointed toward the mysterious Manning.

For some intuitive reason, McGee didn't believe in Manning.

He studied the little note that had announced Manning's proposed call.

And when he found it was of similar typing to that made by Vane's own machine, he nodded his head in deep satisfaction. Moreover, he found paper in Vane's desk of a corresponding kind to that used in the note, and he came to the conclusion that somebody had manufactured that note with an intent to turn suspicion to one Manning which rightfully belonged in another direction.

Who, then, and why?

It was in the small hours of the morning when McGee set himself to answer these questions.

He was impatient for daybreak and access to the Fingerprint Department. For, though McGee knew that in many instances finger prints did not count for much, yet he felt sure he had now struck a case where they did.

Who else but Pete Jessup could have invented this mythical Manning, and what for, except to save somebody else?

Not for a minute did McGee suspect Pete of the murder—there was no motive for that. The two men had long been the best of friends—and if Jessup was making up evidence there was a strong reason for it.

Doubtless, a woman. McGee didn't think a woman had committed the crime, but he was beginning to think that a woman had been present in the studio at the time the murder had been done, and Jessup was trying to shield her.

McGee had an intuition that amounted almost to clairvoyance and now he was giving it full play.

And yet, when he scrutinized the finger prints on the Devil's Dagger, he was shocked to find they were small and dainty, as it might be, those of a woman.

"Well," thought the young detective, "it may be. That Mallory Vane was a gay Lothario and there were women here now and then—I know that."

So he decided to snatch a few hours' sleep, and

get at the finger print matters early in the morning.

The first thing he concluded in his morning search was that Agatha Barr had been there the day before.

Her initialled cigarette holder lay on an ash tray and a handkerchief he found on the floor bore the initials A. B.

But he had no thought of her as a criminal. Why should she kill Vane, the man who had written the play she wished to play in?

Or, had she so much wanted it for Thorndike, and had become so enraged at Vane's letting Larkin have it?—well, he must wait until he could get more facts.

The body had been taken away, Jessup was quartered at Larkin's place, and so, when McGee went out to get some breakfast, he locked the studio and took the key with him.

“When he returned he had Breen, the fingerprint man, along, and the two set to work.

A couple of hours' study and investigation proved to them that the prints on the dagger were most certainly those of a woman. That the prints on the little volume of Hamlet were those of the same woman. That the prints on the note from Manning and the prints on the half-smoked cigar were those of Pete Jessup.

McGee wagged his head sagaciously and proceeded.

On the evening newspaper were a few of Jessup's prints, up at the top corner, where the name and number were written.

This gave McGee pause. If Jessup had written that name and number to carry on the idea of a caller named Manning, where had the paper really come from? For Jessup had said they had no evening paper at the studio.

Yet there were other finger marks clearly on the margin of the paper.

That must be looked into. And, folding the paper carefully he laid it down.

It was nearly noon when Guy Thorndike walked in.

"Good morning," he said, to the astonished McGee. "I am Thorndike, the actor. I am told my friend Vane has been killed and I came round to see if I could be of assistance in any way."

"I'm glad to see you, Mr. Thorndike," said the young detective. "Have you any knowledge of the matter?"

The two men looked at each other. Thorndike, tall, handsome, and of a reserved demeanor, McGee, eager, alert, and evidently curious.

"Not any definite knowledge, but perhaps a

little information. Are you suspecting anyone definitely? ”

“ No, not exactly definitely. Do you know James Manning? ”

“ Never heard of him,” and Thorndike looked interested. “ Who is he? ”

“ That’s what I’m trying to find out. I think he’s a sort of Mrs. Harris. Were you here yesterday afternoon, Mr. Thorndike? ”

“ Yes, I was. That’s what I came to tell you. I was here between five and six o’clock.”

“ And Mr. Vane was all right then? ”

“ Entirely so. Not in a very good humor, but perfectly well and sound.”

“ And your interview with him was amicable? ”

“ Amicable, but not entirely satisfactory. I wanted him to let me have a play he wrote, but he declined.”

“ For what reason? ”

“ I don’t want to go into details about that. He simply said he was not willing to let me have it.”

“ Did he mention selling it to Mr. Larkin or Mr. Mortimer? ”

“ No, he said nothing of either of those men, but declined to sell it to me.”

“ Was anyone else here when you were here? ”

“ I saw no one.”

"Have you any reason to think anyone else was here?"

"Look here, Mr. McGee, I'd rather not answer that. If anyone else was here, I saw no one——"

"And you don't want to incriminate anybody, eh? Now, Mr. Thorndike, this is a very serious matter. Mr. Vane has been murdered, we want to find his murderer, of course. We have reason to believe he was killed shortly before your visit here. So, you must see how necessary it is for you to tell us all you know."

"Then, in the interests of justice, I will say that I did hear a woman's voice, just as I myself knocked at the door."

"What did she say?"

"I don't know—I merely heard the tones, and then I heard Vane say 'Hush—somebody's coming. Don't make a sound.' So I knew there was some woman here. But I wanted to see him so I insisted on entering. When he opened the door to me there was no woman in sight."

"And you saw none during your stay here?"

"No, I assumed she was hiding—perhaps in one of the bedrooms. It was none of my business."

"No, but that woman may have been the murderess of Mallory Vane."

"I can't think that——" Thorndike said musingly.

"No? Then you know who the woman was?"

"I don't. I've no idea whatever as to her identity. But I can't imagine a woman really killing a man—especially such a fearful deed as that stabbing must have been."

"Oh, come now, you can imagine it. You must know in the annals of history women have killed as well as men."

"In history, yes. But in real life is different."

"Yet there are a woman's finger prints on the Devil's Dagger. And, since you heard a woman's voice in here—or heard Mr. Vane speaking to some woman, we must, at least, find her."

"Don't drag a woman into the case unless you have to. You know Vane had a great many women friends, and if the one here at that hour had nothing to do with the murder, it would be too bad to disclose her identity."

"You're a chivalrous man, Mr. Thorndike, and, I see the point of your remarks. But it is necessary for us to learn of all the people who were here yesterday, between five and six or thereabouts. I'm glad you came forward to tell of your presence here. What time did you say it was?"

"Between five and six is the nearest I can state.

I bought an afternoon paper on the way here. There it is now—I left it here.”

“You left this paper here!” McGee picked up the newspaper.

“Yes, I think that’s the one.”

“But this was left by Manning. See here’s his hotel number, ‘Manning, 408.’”

“Then where is the one I left here?”

“I don’t know. I haven’t seen any other.”

“Queer,” and Thorndike looked puzzled. “But see here—I had clipped a piece out of mine—a short editorial.”

And as McGee folded the pages over, there was the vacant space on the editorial page.

“That’s my paper,” declared Thorndike. “But there was no name or number on it when I had it.”

“Well, it’s a strange mix-up,” returned the detective. “I suspected this Manning person was a myth, now I’m sure of it. And the finger prints on this corner of the paper, and on the type-written note and even on the half-smoked cigar are all Mr. Jessup’s.”

“What do you get from that?”

“That Mr. Jessup was so anxious to shield somebody that was here that he manufactured this evidence against an imaginary man.”

"Clever work," and Thorndike looked his admiration.

"Yes, if it had worked—but it didn't, you see. Now is Mr. Jessup shielding a woman? That's what we have to find out."

"Well, find out, but don't make your findings public unless you've a real crime to charge. You know, Mr. McGee, you must know, what it would mean to a woman, probably an actress, to have her name dragged into a murder case if she had no hand in the matter herself. And even if her innocence were positively proved, the stigma would remain and perhaps blight her whole life."

"Yes, Mr. Thorndike, I realize all that, and I'll observe your wishes as far as I consistently can. But the woman must be found and interrogated, and if that brings her into the limelight, we can't help it. But I'll do all I can to keep her name out of it if she's in no way incriminated. I don't, as yet, suspect a woman of the murder, but I do think there was one here at the time the crime was committed, and she may well have been the cause of it. Fifty per cent. of all murders have a woman back of them somehow."

"And she should be kept in the background—if it's a possible thing."

"For a woman hater, Mr. Thorndike, you're exceedingly chivalrous to the sex."

"That's the reason. Your women lovers are not always chivalrously inclined."

"True talk, sir. Too bad to slam the dead, but Mallory Vane was one of that sort. Well, I'll go on snooping. You see, my motto is the same as Ben Franklin's, stick to it. I feel if I examine every jot and tittle of this studio the place will speak up. Walls have ears, but furnishings have tongues. I wish to goodness somebody hadn't so carefully wiped up the telephone booth. Not a fingermark on the instrument or the desk or the walls! Except of course, ours, since we've taken hold of this thing."

As McGee talked he was scrutinizing the telephone book. He gazed at it as he would wrest a secret from it.

"You see, Mr. Thorndike," he rambled on, "they say a detective is like a hound on a scent. I suppose there never was a murder case reported or a detective story written that didn't affirm that. Now, I'm more like a puppy at a root. Know what I mean? I just dig and scratch and gnaw until something gives way. And just now I'm gnawing at this book. Look at it. Notice anything queer about it?"

"No, I don't," and Guy scanned the worn and shabby volume carefully.

"Well, smell it."

Without an unnecessarily close approach, Thorndike did as he was bid.

"What's it smell of?"

"Nothing much. Sort of like chemicals."

"I should say so. Now, why, in the name of common sense should a telephone book in a studio occupied by a writer and a painter smell of chemicals? Paint, oil, turpentine—all these would be natural. But chemicals? Excuse me—the puppy has a new grip on his root!"

McGee left the room, and Thorndike was left alone with the finger-print man. The latter was a glum person and made no attempt at conversation.

"Fingerprints play a large part in crime detection nowadays, don't they?" Guy said, conversationally, for he was interested in the matter.

"They're the whole works," the other grunted.

"Don't you want mine?" Thorndike smiled a little.

"Got 'em."

"You have! When did you take them?"

"Aw, they're on this evenin' paper of yours. And you've left plenty of 'em about since you came in. I could gather up a dozen if I liked."

"Well, you're welcome to them," Thorndike spoke curtly. He didn't like this man at all.

"Don't touch that dagger," came a growling warning, as he stood glancing at the fearful blade.

"I don't intend to. Are those prints on its hilt the ones you think are made by a woman?"

"I don't think so—I say they are."

"Why not by a small man?"

"If you want a course in Fingerprint technique go to Headquarters. I'm not a teacher."

"Beg pardon," said Guy, so patronizingly that it was more of a rebuff than a sharp word would have been.

With a face registering triumph and excitement, McGee came back. He brought the telephone book with him, and replaced it in the glass-doored booth.

"The plot thickens," he said, "and that's no idle boast! What do you think, Mr. Thorndike! That book belongs in the studio of one Brockway, down the hall a piece—and, if you please, he's an amateur photographer! One of those big, classy ones who make photographs that beat hand work. That's why the book smells of chemicals."

The enthusiastic detective had chosen Guy as his audience, rather than the glum Breen, hoping for responsive interest if not admiration.

But the response was merely a disinterested, "Well?"

"Well? Don't you see? This book was in Mr. Brockway's studio at four o'clock yesterday afternoon, when he went out. He missed it this morning and thought the distributor had taken it and forgotten to leave him a new one."

"Well?" again that blank expression on Thorn-dike's face.

Had McGee but known it, this was a sure sign of intense interest.

"Well, this puppy at his root digs up the conclusion that the murderer tried very hard to remove all evidences of his guilt—or, somebody else did it for him."

"Don't say him, Mr. McGee," came the guttural accents of Breen. "There's not the slightest chance that the slayer was a man. Those prints on the dagger are a woman's prints. There are several of them, they are clear and plain, and no others are superimposed. The blade is so sharp and slender, that little force was needed to jab it in. Also, a woman would sure be nervous and hysterical. Her hands would be moist—you know all these things, Mr. McGee, and so her prints would be clear."

"Why so many of them?" the detective said.

"Looks 's if she tried to pull it out again, and

couldn't do it. Lots easier to jab it in than to yank it out, you see."

Thorndike hated the man's callous manner and cool tone. He, himself was emotionally wrought up to the highest pitch, but for that very reason appeared calm and undisturbed. But Breen was no such dissembler. He was really unmoved by the horrors he himself was picturing.

"Then you think a woman killed Vane?" McGee said, for he had confidence in Breen's detective keenness as well as his expert knowledge.

"Sure. No doubt about it—not the leastest mite."

"Then that narrows our search. At least, we'll look for a woman first. But I'm not so sure myself. That is, I don't want to be sure. Yet we all know that Mallory Vane was what somebody called a 'deevil amang th' weemen.' And, I'll admit that I found a lot of notes and pictures and souvenirs in his desk drawers that might point to any one of a dozen women."

"That's what I spoke about," Thorndike said, with the air of a dictator. "Please be careful not to give unnecessary publicity to the eleven innocent ones. They may have been indiscreet—Vane was a great lover—but indiscretion is not a crime. And, I feel it my duty to urge you to go carefully."

"Like as if I was walkin' on eggs, Mr. Thorndike," and McGee gave him a good-natured wink. "Now, I'll take a turn in the bedrooms and see if I can't get a pointer."

It was by chance that the detective entered Pete Jessup's bedroom first.

It was in order, for Pete had not slept there. Everything was tidy and the puppy at his root could dig up nothing incriminating. But he was a persistent puppy and when a chance thrust of his hand down into a trunk full of clothing struck against a strange feeling object, he quickly dragged forth the blood-stained telephone book.

"Merciful powers!" he ejaculated, with no thought of what his words meant or might mean. "The book!"

Almost awed, he gazed on the blood stains—small, dainty finger prints, little smears and smudges, and then, after a moment, he thrust it back and closed the trunk.

He came from the room, entered Vane's and soon came out of that.

"Where's Mr. Jessup?" he inquired, casually, as if Thorndike might know.

"You said he went home with Mr. Larkin for the night," the actor reminded him.

"Yes, that's so. Well, I want to see him. And I want to see him now."

"I'm going now," Guy said, "I'll drop round there, or you can telephone."

"I'll telephone," McGee said, and a new sternness had come into his voice. "Also, I'd rather you wouldn't leave just now, Mr. Thorndike. If you don't want to stay because I ask you, I'll just observe that maybe your friend Jessup might be glad to have you here."

As a matter of fact, McGee wanted him for a witness. He didn't know what might break when he confronted Jessup with the fact of the hidden book, and he preferred the presence of another man.

Yet he realized, too, that someone else might have put that book in Jessup's trunk.

"You stay, too, Breen," he directed, and then, after telephoning Dan Larkin's house for Pete, the puppy found some more roots to worry in Vane's desk.

Yet he sat a little abstractedly, thinking, until Jessup came in.

The gay insouciant countenance of Pete Jessup was sadly changed. He had put in a very bad night. His principal worry was that telephone book, and now he knew it had been discovered. He wished he had left it where he found it, or, better, had destroyed

it. Yet he could think of no way by which he could have put the miserable thing out of existence. It had seemed to him during his long night's weary agonies, that of all things on the face of the earth, a telephone book is the most cumbersome, unwieldy, enormous obstacle a man can be up against.

He brightened a little at the sight of Thorndike, for they were good friends, but his heart sank at the satisfied look on the face of McGee, and the comfortable expectancy shown by Breen.

"You were the first to discover Mr. Vane's body, Mr. Jessup?" McGee said, conventionally.

"Yes," Pete replied, wearily. "But we've been through all that before."

"Right. So we'll go on to what happened next. Reminds me of my school days. A chap bet me I couldn't answer him any question in my history book. I bet I could. He opened the book about the middle, and read: 'What happened next?' As I didn't know whether he was in the Revolution or the Civil War, I lost my bet."

This was a touch of psychology on the detective's part. He saw Jessup was fairly twitching with apprehension, and anxious to learn the worst. He knew if he held off a moment his victim would be on tenterhooks and so more unnerved and unstrung.

"But in this case you do know what happened

next, for you were here on the spot. Mr. Jessup, why did you clean up so carefully in the telephone booth? Why did you wipe off the telephone itself, and also the shelf it rests on? ”

“ I didn’t,” said Pete, stubbornly.

“ Yes, you did. And then,” McGee leaned toward him impressively, “ you went down the hall and brought back the telephone book from Mr. Brockway’s studio. Why? ”

At this, Pete’s calm gave way.

“ I didn’t! I didn’t! ” he repeated, but his quivering lips and terror-stricken eyes gave his words the lie.

“ Go and get the other book,” McGee said, quietly.

“ I—I don’t know where—where it is.”

“ Go! ” McGee pointed toward the bedroom.

“ Go and get it, or I will do so.”

Almost hypnotized by that pointing finger, Jessup rose, and threw himself back in his chair with a muttered, “ Damned if I will! ”

So McGee went in and returned in a moment with the telltale book.

“ These prints, Mr. Breen,” he said, handing over the book, which he held gingerly, “ are they the same as the ones on the dagger? ”

The expert turned to his box of paraphernalia,

dusted one of the prints and after a moment's use of his lens, replied,

"The same, Mr. McGee."

"Of course, they would be," and McGee nodded his head. "Now, Mr. Jessup, whose prints are they?"

"I don't know, and if I did I shouldn't tell."

The climax of his distress having been reached, Jessup had somehow got a grip on himself, and was ready for fight.

His tone was so positive and his face so set, that McGee tried another tack.

Leaving the room, and closing the door behind him, they heard him ring the bell of the elevator.

And two minutes later, he was back in the room, this time with a terror-stricken look on his own face.

"The elevator girl," he said, "is the one that was on yesterday afternoon. She says there was no woman here after five o'clock, except," he hesitated and then said slowly, "except Mrs. Guy Thorndike!"

With one bound Guy Thorndike sprang at the detective and knocked him down.

CHAPTER X

MORE INQUIRY

LIKE seconds in a duel or like trainers at a sparring contest, Breen and Pete Jessup sprang to the sides of their respective friends and grabbed their arms. To be sure, Breen's grabbing was to raise the fallen, while Pete was merely of a mind to prevent another fall.

"Collect yourself, Thorny," he said, with a meaning glance. "You're in enough trouble now."

McGee looked almost comical. His chief injury was a bumped head which was beginning to swell. He pressed his palm to it as he said, "I'm not angry—but I'm terribly—terribly hurt."

Jessup laughed involuntarily, for the detective's attitude was that of a father toward an obstreperous child.

But Thorndike was in no mood for lightness of tone or speech.

"Take back that lie!" he exclaimed, and Breen put in a word.

"Prove it a lie, Mr. Thorndike, and we will take it back. Otherwise it's up to you to apologize."

"Me apologize!" Jessup had never seen Thorn-

dike in such a rage before. For the first time in Pete's experience the actor had fairly lost his head.

McGee was quick to take advantage of the situation. He knew *in vino veritas*, but he also knew that when a man is beside himself with fury he is intellectually intoxicated, and may well say things he wouldn't say in calmer moments.

Also, McGee knew the power of suggestion.

The young detective was given to modern scientific methods of crime investigation, but more than this he had a quick wit of his own and a few original ideas.

He had more than once said his motto was "adopt, adapt, adept."

This, he expounded, meant to adopt what came his way, whether a clue, a piece of evidence or a situation; to adapt it to his own uses and advantage, and to be adept about it.

Wherefore, entirely unchagrined by the onslaught, he thought only of extracting what possible good he could from it.

McGee was a lithe, slender man, not good looking, but with a strong, keen face, and blue-gray eyes whose gaze was, at times, little short of hypnotic.

He fixed his compelling glance on Thorndike, and said, "You knew your wife was here yesterday, Mr. Thorndike?"

"I did not, sir, but I do know she was not here yesterday or any other day."

"How about it, Mr. Jessup?"

The quick-witted detective had caught a knowing gleam in Pete's eye which that poor chap would have rather have died than shown, had he known it.

"Mrs. Thorndike here? Never, to my knowledge."

Now if there was one thing McGee was really adept in detecting it was a lie. Nine times out of ten he could tell by pure observation when a man was speaking falsely. And Pete Jessup was not a natural liar. He had acquired some proficiency in the art, but often at the critical moment he showed a lamentable lack of technique.

So, clear-eyed McGee concluded that the lady in question had assuredly been there the day before and that Jessup knew it, whether Thorndike did or not.

But the knowledge was appalling. Consequences rushed through his mind. *Had* she been there? If so, did she know anything about the crime? Must she be suspected? Must she be interrogated? Where could she be found? Would Thorndike kill him if he inquired concerning these things?

These thoughts and many more flew through McGee's hair-trigger brain far more rapidly than they may be written or read.

But Thorndike, himself, was no dub at mind reading. He recovered his mental equilibrium almost as quickly as he regained his physical poise, and Jessup gave a sigh of relief as he saw Guy hold out his hand to the alertly watching detective.

"Im sorry I knocked you down, Mr. McGee—you're a good sport."

"That's all right," the other returned, accepting the hand clasp, though both knew it was merely a matter of policy on both sides. "Now, when and where can I see Mrs. Thorndike?"

But before this question was answered, the door was flung open and a man appeared.

A middle-aged, middle-sized, middle-class man, whose air was bumptious and manner proprietary.

"I," he said, pausing impressively, "I am Roland Ross."

"Hello, Roly," said Thorndike, "how are you?"

The careless tone and brief, disinterested glance of the speaker infuriated the newcomer, who had looked for deference and even homage.

Nor was Jessup any warmer of welcome. He knew slightly this relative and heir of Mallory Vane, and looked upon him as merely a necessary evil, who must get busy as soon as possible removing Vane's effects.

But McGee had a real interest in the man. He

chose to look on everybody who came in as a possible suspect, and this man had motive, even though suspicion could go no further.

"Yes," Ross went on, seeing the interest in McGee's eye, "I am the cousin and heir of Mallory Vane. I've been to see the—the—him, and I've talked with my lawyer. In fact, I'm practically established now at the head of things and I'll take charge here."

"Not charge here," said Jessup, "that is to say, not charge here. For these are my diggings quite as much as Mr. Vane's. And I'm a very busy person and very hard to get along with. So, Roly, old boy, if you'll just send some packers and movers and take your new possessions away as soon as may be, I'll be obliged to you."

"Yes—I see. But I didn't mean just that, Jessup. I meant I'd take charge of the inquest—inquiry—whatever you call it. I don't propose to let Mallory's murder go unavenged, if I can help it."

McGee, who had disliked the man on first sight, quite took to him as he heard the ring of genuine righteous indignation in his voice.

"No—of course not." Pete hadn't looked for this. "But the detectives have pretty well gone over the ground, I should say, and I thought—I hoped they would be soon ready to leave. How about it, Mr. McGee?"

"Sorry, Mr. Jessup, but we'll have to invade these premises until one or two matters are cleared up. I should say a couple of days longer or so."

"Just where do you stand?" asked Ross, of the detective. "Have you made any real progress? I asked the police people, and they referred me to you for details."

"Well, Mr. Ross," McGee continued, "you must remember the crime is not yet twenty-four hours old. You must remember that it is decidedly a mysterious crime. You must also realize that, as is usual in a murder mystery, we have only circumstantial evidence to go upon. And that sort of evidence has to be carefully weighed and sifted and checked up before we can look upon it as conclusive."

"But you have oral witnesses, haven't you? I don't mean exactly witnesses of the crime, but people to question?"

"Oh, yes—but it is still more difficult to weigh and check up their evidence. You know it is said the only witness that cannot lie is one that cannot speak."

"Now what do you mean by that?"

"That a mute witness, as a finger print, or a photograph must tell the truth shown on its face. But a human witness may speak falsely—even though trying to tell the truth."

“He may speak falsely on purpose—but what does the rest of that mean?”

“It means that with the best intention and most honest endeavor, a man may give an utterly wrong impression. Why, look here, when you came up in the elevator just now, how many passengers were in it?”

“Oh, several—let me see—I should say about six or eight.”

“Men or women?”

“I’ve no idea. Both, I suppose.”

“Was the car run by a girl or a man?”

“I don’t know at all.”

“Well, there it is. You observed none of these points. It is of no consequence. But suppose it was of importance to the solving of the mystery of your cousin’s death. You would try your best to remember, and would doubtless guess at the facts, and put on record answers that might be utterly wrong.”

“Yes, I see what you mean.”

“Again, what time did you arrive at this building?”

“Oh, about fifteen minutes ago.”

“You came directly up in the elevator?”

“Yes.”

“How long were you coming up?”

"About five minutes—or say, four minutes."

"And you've been in this room how long?"

"I guess about ten minutes."

"Well, Mr. Ross, suppose a man's guilt or innocence hung on those answers. You were just one minute and a half coming up in the elevator. I know for I've timed it before. It seemed longer to you because you were anxious to get here. You've been in this room twenty-three minutes. It seems a shorter time because you've been interested. So there you see what is the value of evidence as to time, by a casual witness."

"Yes," Ross said, interested but not deeply impressed. "Now, where does it all stand? I mean what have you found out, definitely, positively, by means of any sort of witnesses?"

"Well," and McGee set his lips firmly as if for a pronunciamiento, "I think we have no positive, definite knowledge except that Vane was killed between five and seven o'clock, with a long sharp dagger."

"Who is last known to have seen him alive?" Ross snapped.

"That's hard to say. One might assume Mr. Thorndike, but he has said he heard a woman's voice in here when he arrived, and as he did not see her at all it is to be assumed she was still here when he left. That let's him out."

"Not necessarily. If he had killed Mal, and the

woman had discovered it after he left she would, of course, have slunk away without saying anything to anybody."

"Good Heavens!" Pete cried, "Guy didn't kill Vane! Why, he had every reason for wanting him alive!"

Earlier in the discussion Thorndike had slipped out of the room and left the building. He had gone out quietly but with no attempt at secrecy. As a matter of fact, McGee had seen him go, but had no real reason to detain him, and, moreover, McGee had sent a message to Headquarters to get Mrs. Thorndike's finger prints, secretly, if possible, but immediately, anyway.

"You see," McGee went on, "as Mr. Thorndike arrived here yesterday, he heard a woman's voice and then heard Vane say, 'Somebody's coming! Hide—quick!' and apparently she did so, for Thorndike saw no one here when he entered. He says all that was none of his business ——"

"And it was his own wife—and he didn't know it!" said Ross, wide-eyed.

"It was not!" Jessup fairly shouted. "You've no right nor reason to make such an assertion."

McGee raised his eyebrows at the sudden outburst.

"Were you here?" he asked.

"No."

Then you know nothing about it. The elevator girl says ——”

“That elevator girl! She’s a little sneak! She’s into everybody’s business! She ought to be fired!”

McGee promptly adopted the hints offered him by Pete’s angry attitude, adapted them to his own theories and proved adept at the business.

“There’s no reason that I can see,” he said, looking directly at Jessup, “to doubt the girl’s statement that Mrs. Thorndike was the only woman to come here after five o’clock yesterday afternoon.”

“There’s every reason to doubt it,” Pete retorted; “she’s a tricky little flapper—I know her—and she’d swear black was white if it suited her purpose to do so.”

“But why should she tell an untruth in this instance?” asked McGee.

“I’m sure I don’t know. I can’t follow the workings of her silly bobbed head! But it’s too absurd to connect a fairy-like little thing like Mrs. Thorndike with a crime!”

“Not as a perpetrator,” McGee said, thoughtfully, “but as a cause. ‘Seek the woman’ more often results in finding her a cause than a criminal.”

“Mrs. Thorndike is neither. And I don’t believe she was here at all.”

“Look here, Mr. Jessup,” the detective faced him squarely, “you cleaned up around this place

when you came in, you hid the telephone book, you manufactured some clever, if futile clues of a cigar and a newspaper and all that. Why?"

"Because," Pete spoke after a moment's hesitation, "I felt sure some woman had been here. The stains on the book were clearly from feminine fingers and—and, well, I just felt that if any woman was concerned in the matter, I'd do anything I could to draw a red herring across her trail."

"Good for you," put in Roland Ross. "I'd do the same thing. Mallory had a lot of lady friends, and there's no use getting them in bad until we have to. I'm mighty keen to catch the murderer and hang him, if it is a him. But if it's a woman—well, Mallory was no saint, you know, and maybe ——"

"Those things are all beside the mark," McGee said. "The thing is to investigate this murder and find out who did it. Nothing else counts. I'm at this thing like a puppy at a root, and I shan't let go until I've dug out the answer. All you men want to shield the woman in the case—if any. That's natural. Any decent man would. But all the same, we've got to hew to the line and so forth. What does Mr. Larkin think about it all, Mr. Jessup?"

"He's as much at sea as any of us regarding the murderer. Also, he hopes no woman's name will be dragged in. He sat up most of the night reading the play he bought from Vane. You know he was here

earlier in the afternoon and bought Mal's new play." This last was addressed to Roland Ross. "And as I suppose you also know, he left his check for ten thousand dollars as a first payment. He'll take up the matter with you whenever you're ready."

"Lucky for Larkin that Guy Thorndike was here later, or Dan might be a suspect," Ross suggested.

"No," Pete returned. "Like Thorndike and myself and all our bunch, none of us had any reason to desire Mal's death. There was no jealousy over any woman or anything of that sort among our crowd."

"Whose cigarette holder is this?" McGee asked, suddenly.

"Agatha Barr's," Pete said, "she keeps one at a lot of places. She's here a good deal, of course. This place is a sort of rendezvous for the whole bunch. She was here yesterday, Dan Larkin says he left her here when he went away."

"It may have been her voice, then, Mr. Thorndike heard when he knocked at the door."

"It may have been," agreed Pete.

"And you may have thought it was when you so carefully cleaned off the traces in the telephone booth."

"Maybe," said Pete, laconically.

"You're a friend of Miss Barr's?"

"Very much so."

"I am, too," said Ross; "at least I'm a great admirer. She never killed Mallory, never in this world. And nobody would kill Mal on her account. They were good chums, but not lovers. Don't bother about the ladies, Mr. McGee; find the man who did this thing, and you'll find a mean, traitorous chap, who is both a coward and a villain."

"Very likely, Mr. Ross. But a clever villain, for he has pretty well baffled us so far. Now, I'm going to have a talk with that mendacious elevator girl and with the doorman and desk attendant. I'll have them up here one at a time. Mr. Jessup, you can stay or go, as you like. You the same thing, Mr. Ross."

But both men elected to stay.

The girl was, as Pete had said, decidedly of the flapper type.

Her bobbed hair had a "permanent" and her vermilion cheeks and magenta lips, though gay in effect, were far from harmonious in tone.

Her snapping black eyes and gleaming white teeth added to what Pete called her "map-coloring," and her attire was the last word in inexpensive materials.

"So I'm to be a witness, am I?" she said, pertly, as she came in and greeted the detective.

"Yes, please," McGee said, politely, but fixing her with his eye. Trying to, rather, for she was not

very fixable. "First, will you tell me what callers you brought up to this studio yesterday afternoon between the hours of say, five and seven?"

"Say five and your grandmother! Do I look like a time puncher? Or a cuckoo clock? I don't keep a card index of all the rabble I cart up and down!"

"Try to think, Miss Jennings. You may be an important help to the investigation."

McGee's intuition told him this tack would appeal to her vanity and it did.

"Oh, well, if I can render assistance——" she paused as if enjoying her own sudden importance. "Let me see. I brought up a lot of people for this floor—but of course, I can't say that they were all for this studio. There was Mr. Larkin ——"

"That was earlier in the afternoon ——"

"Oh, yes, so it was. Well, there was Miss Barr——"

"And what time did she come?"

"There you go again! I tell you I don't own a wrist watch, and I wouldn't wear one if I did—lessen it was a pretty swell one—well, Miss Barr was, I should judge, 'long 'bout four—say. Then she takes the air, maybe, 'bout five. And direckly after 'long comes the china doll baby, Mrs. Thorndike."

"You're sure of this?" McGee looked at her

sternly, and he noted the glance of scornful defiance she flung at Pete.

"So she's in love with Jessup," concluded the astute sleuth.

"Sure I'm sure of it! I may not have the time to the minute, but nobody could mistake that spunglass kid. She oughter be under a glass shade!"

Pete looked daggers at the girl, but he said no word, knowing that a stinging retort would be forthcoming.

"How long did she stay?" McGee inquired.

"She's up here yet, I should say; anyway, I never took her down."

"You couldn't have taken her down, because she never came up!" Pete was unable to keep quiet longer. "Mr. McGee, this girl is mistaken about the matter of Mrs. Thorndike's coming here. She proves it by saying she didn't take her down again."

"Mr. Jessup, you're a disturbing element. I'll have to ask you to keep out of this conversation or leave the room."

"Caught it that time, didn't you?" and the girl grinned broadly. "Well, truly, mister, I dunno how the little Thorndike popsy-wopsy got down, 'cause, honest, I didn't take her."

"Who else came?"

"Mr. Larkin——"

"You said him before."

"Well, then, Mr. Thorndike—now, don't ask me what time that was, 'cause I don't know. There were far more attractive passengers in my car for other floors. My attention was all took up with them. This runnin' elevators in a stujo buildin' is hectic work, I'll tell the world."

McGee questioned the silly chit a little longer, and then concluding he could learn nothing further, dismissed her and sent for the doorman.

He was a big, good-natured chap, but his information was no more marked by accuracy than Miss Jennings' had been.

He remembered the arrival of Miss Barr, because he knew the lady well. She always remembered him at Christmas time.

He remembered the very pretty little lady, but he couldn't say at what time she had come.

"She has been here before?" asked McGee.

"Yes, two or three times," was the reply, and Pete writhed inwardly.

"And then Mr. Thorndike came?"

"Don't know him—oh, you mean the glum-faced actor. Yes, he came and after a short time he went away again."

"Now do try to think what time this was," begged McGee.

"Oh, 'long about six—or mebbe a little before.

He went, that's all I know, and he swung out of the door as if he was all upset."

"Now," Pete protested, "you can't depend on that for anything, Mr. McGee. Anybody who knows Guy Thorndike, knows he always swings out of a door like that."

"Did you see his face?" asked McGee.

"No, sir. I just caught sight of his back as he pushed out. Somebody bumped against him and it seemed to make him mad."

"He hates a crowd," Jessup vouchsafed, to nobody in particular.

Poor Pete had no definite idea in his mind but to take away as far as possible any hint of importance in the presence of either Guy or his wife. If their visits could be made to appear casual and ordinary, they might be left unmolested.

"Mr. Larkin was here?" went on McGee unheeding Jessup.

"And Mr. Jessup, he came in about six."

"Oh, no, Pete interrupted, "it was later. But as you said, Briggs, you've only a vague idea of time."

"Yes, sir," and Briggs, catching Pete's eye, said no more.

McGee missed this fleeting glance, and soon dismissed Briggs.

“Not much out of those minions,” he said, with a sigh, “but here comes my man. Did you get them?”

And eagerly, he received from his trusty messenger a few torn letters and cards.

These, at police orders had been collected from the waste basket of Mrs. Guy Thorndike, and might reasonably be supposed to contain her finger prints.

Breen set to work on them, and the other two men waited in equal suspense but very different moods.

The result was at last announced.

The fingers that had left their imprint on Mrs. Thorndike's personal correspondence were the same ones that had fingered the shining dagger and the blood-stained telephone book.

CHAPTER XI

AN IMPORTANT INTERVIEW

It was nearly noon when Lamb heard a light tap at the door of the boudoir and opened it to see Thorndike standing there.

His face was inscrutable, his voice calm.

"I want to see Mrs. Thorndike," he said.

"Why—why—she is not up yet."

"Very well, ask her to get up, please, and I will wait here until she will see me."

Guy took an easy chair and without further word or look at Lamb, fell into that pose which is somewhat absurdly known as a brown study.

The woman went to her mistress who was sitting up in bed really enjoying her rolls and chocolate.

"Mr. Thorndike is in the boudoir and wants to see you," she said, briefly. "Shall I dress you?"

"Wants to see me?" said Prillilgirl, in a scared whisper. "I—I won't see him!"

"I think you'll have to—he's camped there for the day."

"Camped? There? Oh—Lamb—I can't see him!"

"Now, don't take it like that," adjured Lamb, wisely. "You've got to see him, you know, so get up at once."

When Lamb took that authoritative tone, it usually brought about obedience, and slowly Prillilgirl got out of bed.

She said nothing at all, until she was ready for her gown, and then pointed to a boudoir robe that was merely a mass of pale blue chiffon, with tiny pink roses tucked in Frenchily here and there.

Her lovely hair was crushed into a boudoir cap that framed her face like a halo, but the flower-like little face was pale and white and drawn, and the big dark eyes were frightened and terror-stricken.

Lamb opened the door further, and with her hands clasped tightly to her breast, Prillilgirl slowly, falteringly crossed the threshold.

Thorndike rose, and the two stood a moment, staring at one another.

Her beauty made not the slightest impression on him, he had no use for her whatever, but he was wild with rage at the thought of her visiting Vane's studio alone.

Yet the utter misery in the sweet little face, the fright and despair in the great eyes touched some chord of pity and his voice was almost gentle as he placed a chair and said, "Sit down, Corinne."

She sat down, trembling violently and giving him a quick glance as quickly averted.

It would have been better for her had she faced him more bravely. Thorndike scorned weakness and admired spirit in a woman. He looked at her as if she were some worthless, useless thing, that yet had to be reckoned with.

"Where were you yesterday afternoon, Corinne?" he asked, in a tone a judge might use to a convicted criminal.

"I—I went to a—picture gallery."

The poor child didn't want to lie to him, but she was relying on the soundness of Jessup's advice and he had told her to stick to her story through thick and thin. Well, the thick and thin had come, and she was sticking.

"What picture gallery?"

"Why—the—that is, the Metropolitan Museum."

This was an inspiration. Surely, she thought, nobody could say whether she had been there or not.

"Ah, the Metropolitan. What pictures were you looking at?"

His tone, his glance, his slight hint of a smile told her she was not believed. But she stuck.

"The oil—that is, the old masters."

She hoped this was safe ground.

"Don't try so hard to lie, Corinne," he said coldly. "It is simply silly. You couldn't convince a blind deaf mute. Since you won't tell me, I'll tell you. You were at Mallory Vane's studio."

"Was I?" she looked utterly blank, but not with the blankness of intention, rather as one whose plans have suddenly fallen through.

"Stop looking like an absolute idiot! Yes, you were at Vane's studio, alone with him. Did he make love to you?"

"Oh!" Her shudder at the remembrance and her wide-eyed horror gave him a more positive answer than any words could have done.

"Did you kill him?"

She fairly jumped. "Kill him?" she almost shrieked. And, then, in a low whisper, "I don't know—did I?"

The last was appealing, almost as if begging for information on an unknown subject.

Thorndike stared at the frightened little thing. Crouched in her chair, a fluffy mass of chiffon and flowers, her pink palms pressed tight together she seemed more fairy than woman, more sprite than human.

"You don't know?" he said, slowly—"Corinne, did you say you don't know?"

"That's what I said." She seemed a trifle more collected. "I don't know—yet. Do you?"

"Oh," in exasperation, "haven't you *any* sense? Not any at all?"

"Wait a minute—let me think. Oh, Guy, will men come? Will they question me?"

"Probably. What shall you tell them?"

"What *can* I tell them? Oh, don't let them come! Don't, I beg of you—I can't see them—I can't face them—what shall I say to them?"

"Tell them the truth."

"Oh, I can't do that! Anything but that! Help me, Guy, help me——"

Lamb burst into the room, her face ablaze with indignation.

"Stop tormenting that child!" she cried. "I won't stand it another minute! Guy Thorndike, you let her alone. Of course, she didn't kill anybody, that angel baby! Come to Lamb, sweetheart."

With a crooning sound she gathered the forlorn little figure into her arms, and cast black looks at Thorndike.

"As if you hadn't done the poor child harm enough already!" she stormed. "You're a selfish brute! You've never thought of anyone but yourself and you never will. But you shan't carry this inquisition any further. I don't care what this child

has done—I'll look out for her—I'll see anyone who comes to interview her, I'll see that she is decently and properly treated. Now, you go out of here, and don't you come back unless I send for you. I've stood all I'm going to—I've worshipped and adored you for years—now I've transferred my love and allegiance to this helpless young thing whose life you have spoiled—whose future you have blackened—oh, I've no use for you—get out!”

But in all this scathing speech the speaker had not raised her voice above its usual pitch. On the contrary, she had delivered her words in a slow, icy tone, cutting in its intensity, and ringing true in its denunciation.

Thorndike looked at her, perplexed. He was not at all intimidated, he cared nothing for her accusations, but he was uncertain what course was best to pursue with that sobbing, quivering little mass of misery.

Unaccustomed to women's ways, except the few whom he favored with his rare friendship, he was entirely unversed in hysterics of this type.

But he felt that nothing could be done at present with either of these and he had learned that Prillil-girl *was* at Vane's the day before, and he wanted to think things out by himself.

So with a glance at Lamb, which told that astute

person clearly, that he was not going because she sent him, he went away.

"There, there, now, dearie child, don't think—don't cry, let Lamb put you right straight back to bed—that's the place for little broken-winged birds."

"No," and Prillilgirl stood upright, and brushed the tears from her eyes. No—I've a lot to do. I must get busy in this matter. Lamb, you knew Mr. Vane was killed?"

"Yes, I knew it."

"Well, you see it's this way."

And after this speech Prillilgirl sat for a long time silent, her eyes deeply bright, her pale cheeks growing faintly pink and her manner becoming animated and determined.

"I don't know whether I killed him or not," she said, at last. "But that remains to be seen. If—I if I did, they'll—they'll find it out, won't they, Lamb?"

"Not if I can help it! If you killed a dozen men, and I could get a chance to swear you didn't, I'd do it so that I'd be believed! You take me into your confidence, Mrs. Thorndike, just as much or just as little as you wish, but remember I'm right here at your elbow every minute, and ready to help you by fair means or foul, by telling the truth or by lying."

"You're a great comfort, Lamb," Prillilgirl sighed; "a great comfort. But I—well, I suppose

I ought to have legal advice—yet I can't tell a lawyer, oh—what shall I do?"

Again the poor child broke into sobs, but only for a moment. She controlled herself quickly and said, "Lamb, you do your part by fixing me up so I'll be strong for this ordeal I've got to go through. Give me anything that will calm my nerves and brace me up—I suppose the men will come soon."

"What men, ma'am?"

"Why, the—you know—the police, the detectives."

"Lord save us! You don't mean that!"

"Of course I do. What else? And Lamb, fix me up as pretty as you can."

Prillilgirl's surmise that the men would come was well founded.

McGee had said at once, on receipt of the authentic finger prints that he must go to see Mrs. Thorndike.

Pete Jessup had tried in vain to dissuade him, but the more arguments Jessup brought forward, the more McGee laughed at him.

"I understand, old man," he said, and Pete cringed at the familiarity, "but even if you do admire the lady, justice must pursue its uninterrupted course. I'll promise to handle the matter with gloves on, and not scare the little one into fits."

"She ought to have a lawyer with her," protested Pete. "She's a shy, delicate little thing, and unfitted to stand a rain of questions."

"She'll have no lawyer," said McGee, shortly. "She can get one afterward if she likes. Her husband can be present at the interview, but no one else. And if she's innocent, my rain of questions won't bother her a bit."

McGee had a rather capacious despatch case, and in it he placed the small volume of Hamlet, the cover of the telephone book, which he had torn off, and, carefully wrapped in cotton wool, the terrible Devil's Dagger.

Then he started for Thorndike's house, leaving Breen in charge of the studio.

Had it not been for his dogged perseverance, his "puppy-at-a-root" persistence, Mr. McGee would have shirked this interview and deputed it to someone else.

He did not at all relish facing the awe-inspiring Thorndike again, nor did he like the idea of badgering a poor little frightened girl.

He didn't know much about the marital affairs of the Thorndikes, but vague rumors had reached his ears of their incompatibility or some such word, and he was ill at ease in his anticipations.

"But it must be gone through with and so he

presented himself at the Thorndike residence and requested to see its master.

Ushered into the reception room, and later confronted by the tall, austere actor, the detective, for one of the few times in his life, felt abashed.

There was no reason why he should, he was only doing his duty, but Thorndike had a way of making people feel abashed when he chose. And at present he chose.

"Mr.—er—McGee?" and if anything is disconcerting it is to have one's name partly forgotten, "you wish to see me?"

"I do, Mr. Thorndike," and the sound of his own voice gave Mr. McGee courage. "I daresay you know why. If not, I'll tell you the simple truth. We have learned that the finger prints on the dagger that killed Mallory Vane were made by your wife's fingers, and I have come to ask her a few questions."

"You have certainly stated your case frankly," Thorndike said, and if his face had turned a shade paler, his manner had also grown a trifle more chilling. "You will tell me how you have learned this?"

"Certainly," and McGee told him.

"What! you sent some one to take papers from my wife's basket?"

"We surely did. We had a proper search warrant and all that. Don't waste your indignation on

that small matter, Mr. Thorndike, you've a lot before you to worry over. Now, will you be present at my interview with Mrs. Thorndike or not? It is at your option."

"No, I will not. It could serve no good purpose, and though I look on it as an unwarrantable outrage, if the law ordains it, I suppose I cannot prevent it."

"You most certainly cannot. May I see Mrs. Thorndike, then?"

"My man will arrange the interview." And turning on his heel, Thorndike left the room.

In a few moments Webb entered and asked McGee to follow him.

Led through the beautiful halls the detective shook his head sadly to think that people living in this wonderful home should be at odds with each other.

He was ushered to a formal little reception room, which was part of Prillilgirl's suite, and in a moment she came to him there.

Of course he had never seen her before, and though expecting a "China doll" type, he was not prepared for this bewitching, enchanting vision.

As requested, Lamb had made her "look pretty," and the result was so successful that McGee almost gasped.

She was garbed in a simple little frock of shell pink organdie whose crisp frills fell away from the soft baby-like throat and arms. A short necklace of pink coral beads was her only ornament and her wonderful gold hair was bound by a carelessly twisted pink ribbon.

Her exquisite face, guiltless of any make-up, was wistful rather than sad, appealing more than despairing.

As a matter of fact, she was scared out of her wits, but she had made up her mind not to show it, and at least, she started in all right.

"Mr. McGee," she said, as she held out a rose-leaf of a hand.

Scarcely daring to take it, he merely touched her finger tips.

As he did so, a queer feeling came over him that these were the finger tips that made the telltale prints.

He shuddered as he took the seat she indicated.

She herself sat on a small straight chair, and as she grasped the sides of its seat, she drew her feet up to the rung, and perched like a frightened school-girl before a teacher.

"You—you want to talk to me?" she said, and Lamb appeared, stolid and menacing, in the doorway.

The sight of someone else than this eerie, fairy being galvanized the detective back to life, and he

said, more gruffly than he meant to, "Yes, ma'am, but alone, please. No one else may be present, unless it is your husband."

Prillilgirl gave a little gurgle of laughter. "My husband? Oh, he wouldn't be bothered to come up. And I can't see you alone—I'm not allowed. Lamb, here, is just my maid. She won't do any harm. Sit down, Lambie."

Obediently, Lamb dropped into a chair, slightly behind her mistress, and looked the picture of dull stupidity.

Feeling unable to combat this situation, McGee let it stand, and began.

"Mrs. Thorndike," he strove desperately to be severe, "you were at Mr. Vane's studio yesterday afternoon?"

Alas for the poor child's plans. The very mention of Vane and his studio put them all to rout. She had intended to be dignified, indifferent, a trifle amused at it all, and in an instant she was none of these things, she was shocked, frightened, terrified.

She turned to Lamb in mute appeal.

"Let me talk for her, sir," Lamb said, commandingly. "Mrs. Thorndike is on the edge of a nervous breakdown and if you persist, you may bring it on. But if you show a little consideration it may well be staved off. I'll answer the questions and

Mrs. Thorndike can agree. Yes, she was at Mr. Vane's yesterday afternoon for a short time."

Lamb was groping in the dark, but she was at her wits' end, and determined to fight to the last ditch.

Prillilgirl nodded her head in acquiescence and her dark eyes became mournful as she fixed them on McGee.

The man felt more and more uncomfortable. It was a new and most disturbing experience for him, but he must go on.

"What did you go for?"

"She went on some business for Mr. Thorndike," said Lamb, so glibly, that the startled dark eyes turned toward her.

McGee caught this, and said very gently, "Did you, Mrs. Thorndike?"

"Yes," she said, "I think that is the truth. But it is—it was a secret. So, don't tell, and I'll tell you. You see, I am writing a play for my husband; I am—that is, I was, collaborating with Mr. Vane on this play—and it was to be a surprise to Mr. Thorndike. That's why he didn't know I was there." She smiled a little now. When McGee seemed interested and credulous she could get along. "Well, you see, we hadn't progressed very far, it was to be a play something like Hamlet ——"

"And you were reading over this small copy of Hamlet ——"

McGee whisked the volume out of his case and held it up.

"Why, yes, that's the very one. May I have it? I'd like to keep it—we had marked some passages, you see."

"I can't let you keep it now—you may perhaps have it later. Mrs. Thorndike, I must come to the point of my inquiry. What were you doing in the telephone booth when you made these marks on the cover of the book there?"

Suddenly he held up before her the blood-stained paper cover from the book.

The dark eyes stared and grew wide with horror. She grasped at Lamb, who put a shielding arm round her, but who was herself transfixed at the awful sight.

McGee pressed his advantage. It was terrible, but he must put it through at once.

"And do you remember this?" he whispered, holding the Devil's Dagger up to her face. "Your finger prints are on this—no others are—Mrs. Thorndike," his voice sank lower yet, "did you kill Mallory Vane?"

She stifled a shriek. She hung on to her self-

control, but her eyes stared wildly now and her breath came in quick gasps.

"I don't know," she moaned, "I tell you I don't know."

"You do know—you can't kill a man and not know it. Did he make love to you? Did he attempt to caress you?"

"Yes," she said, as if hypnotized into telling the truth.

"And you picked up this deadly thing and stabbed him in self-defense, was that it? And then you went to telephone for help, didn't you? But you didn't telephone—or did you?"

"No—no—I didn't telephone—I couldn't."

"No, and I don't wonder! Poor child—so that was the way of it. Where was this dagger when you picked it up?"

"I didn't pick it up—I picked—I picked—oh, I tell you I don't know what I did. I—you see—oh, yes, it was a very hot day—a *very* hot day, and I had you know, a heat stroke—yes, a heat stroke."

Jessup's commands were seething in her tormented brain.

"Yes—and I went to the picture gallery—the Metropolitan, you know, and—and Lamb brought me home. Yes, Lamb brought me home."

She sank back against Lamb's breast, and that irate woman tried to dissuade the detective.

But he silenced her with a wave of his hand. The puppy was at the root.

"Be quiet," he said, "if you say another word I'll put you out of the room. Mrs. Thorndike is excited but she is not ill. She can talk all right."

Prillilgirl sat upright at this. It would seem the words fairly jolted her into composure.

"I can, can I?" she said, "then I will. I *was* there, Mr. Vane did annoy me by his attentions, and I got very angry."

"And then your husband came in," prompted McGee, watching her closely.

She was silent a moment, then said, in an incredulous tone, "Mr. Thorndike? Why, what makes you think that? Mr. Thorndike wasn't there!"

"But he says he was—about half past five or six. He isn't sure of the time, nobody seems to know anything about time."

"Oh, well"—the child-like face took on a wise look, "if Mr. Thorndike says he was there of course he was. He must have arrived after I left."

"But you didn't leave until after Mr. Vane was dead and he was alive when Mr. Thorndike came away—or so Mr. Thorndike says."

"Look here, Mr. Man," and a small forefinger

was shaken in his face, "whatever Mr. Thorndike says is the truth, you can bank on that."

"And you didn't see Mr. Thorndike in the Vane studio yesterday?"

"I did not."

"Then, can you tell us who killed Mr. Vane? We don't suspect you, although we may, unless you can be more definite. But we do very positively suspect you of knowing a lot about it—yes, a whole lot. Now, out with it! What did you see while you were there?"

"Now, Mr. McGee, you have said you suspect me. That gives me a right to ask for counsel, does it not?"

McGee stared at this new attitude. Now this bewildering person talked like a woman.

"Why, yes, you can have counsel, of course."

"But I don't want a lawyer—a stranger. Oh, I'll tell you, can I have a talk—just a talk, you know, with Mr. Jessup, Mr. Peter Jessup?"

"My Lord! I don't know what to make of you. Would your husband approve of your conference with him?"

"Oh, mercy, no!" and Prillilgirl looked disappointed and chagrined.

"You do your confabbing with your husband and any lawyer he may choose for you. And get

at it, for I don't mind telling you you are on mighty thin ice. And if you'll take my advice, you'll own up. If that man annoyed you, or threatened you and you grabbed up that devilish thing and stabbed him, not a jury in the world but would acquit you—with bells on. Come, now, honesty is the best in the long run. 'Fess up, won't you? Did you kill Vane?"

And Prillilgirl, her cheeks flushed with earnestness and her eyes bright with a queer, uncanny shrewdness, replied, "I don't know."

"Then, Mrs. Thorndike," and McGee slowly and carefully packed his exhibits back in the despatch case, "then, I'm afraid you'll have to stand the further annoyances that will be caused you by your surprising ignorance. You're *sure* you don't know."

"I'm sure I don't know. Good morning, Mr. McGee."

CHAPTER XII

LOOSE SCREWS

ON BEING told that Mr. Thorndike had gone out, McGee betook himself back to the studio for a confab with Breen.

"That Thorndike bunch is a queer deal," he said, finding Breen alone and immersed in a book he had taken from the studio shelves. "The husband and wife are certainly at odds and yet he resents any hint of suspicion against her——"

"Lord, man, that's not strange. Nobody wants his wife dragged into a murder trial, whether she's guilty or not."

"I can't see how that little doll-faced chit *can* be guilty—of the crime. Yet it surely begins to look so."

"It has looked so to me all along," Breen declared. "She's just the sort of little flirt who would resent any undue familiarity and if Vane grew desperate, which doubtless he did, she's the very one who would fly into a sudden rage and grab up that Devil's Dagger and drive it at him. You know such a fearfully sharp, thin blade requires

very little force, and even if she only meant to threaten him with it, or defend herself, it might easily have gone farther than she intended."

"You seem to know a lot about her, considering you've not seen her."

"I know the type. The elevator girl's description was enlightening and, too, those little beauties are always like a lot of spoiled kids. They own the earth."

"But Mrs. Thorndike is nobody's fool. She's a queer combination of a doll-faced baby and a smart, shrewd woman."

"This is the first time I've heard any such attributes tacked onto her."

"Well, she is. I can't make her out. Her plea is that she doesn't know whether she killed Vane or not."

"Maybe she doesn't. If she's so rattled, and—oh, you know what I mean, if her mind, not being very strong, sort of gave way at the crisis, she could have stabbed him, I suppose, without really being aware of it."

"Aware of your grandmother! People may do some things unconsciously, but hardly, I should say, murder!"

"I can understand how a woman like that, at her wits' end could ——"

"Could stab the man, yes. But she knew it, all right. That's why I say she's shrewd to adopt this line of defense. If she sticks to her story that she doesn't know whether she did it or not, she can't be made to confess. And as there's no witness, how can she be formally accused?"

"You think she did it?"

"Of course she did. Who else?"

"Other people were in and out."

"That's just it. The others were in and out. She was in—but not out. Young Jessup found her there."

"How do you know?"

"Deduction. He came in and caught her red-handed. She was in the telephone booth calling for her husband—or somebody. He sent her home and then he did all his cleaning up and planting misleading clues and all that. I suppose they are lovers."

"Why didn't Jessup come in, find Vane annoying the lady, and—do the killing himself?" Breen spoke musingly and looked at McGee.

The detective pondered.

"Well, you see her fingerprints are all over the dagger and his are not. Also, her bloody fingerprints are on the telephone book cover."

"All true, but it might have been that she tried

to stop him and so handled the dagger and later she tried to telephone."

"Not convincing. But here's the discrepancy. Mrs. Thorndike reached home, I found out, about quarter before seven. Jessup didn't arrive here until seven."

"He *says* he didn't."

McGee stared. "That's right, Breen. You're sharper than I am. Jessup has lied right along, to save the little lady. No use questioning him any more, for he won't tell the truth. How about Friend Elevator Girl?"

"She's no good. She's in love with the Jessup man, and she's jealous of the pretty lady and of Miss Barr and of all the women who come up here."

"And the doorman seems to have no idea of time."

"No, they don't, really. You know yourself, when the tenants of a building are coming and going all day, it's not to be expected that any attendant should know definitely concerning the hours of any one's arrival or departure. It's only when some coincidence or connection of events would fix it in his mind that the doorman would remember. If somebody came in a few minutes before it was his time to go off duty, he'd know the hour. But unless

something fixed it in his mind like that, he wouldn't know with any degree of exactitude."

"My Lord, Breen, where d'you get the big words?"

The fingerprint man looked a little sheepish.

"I've been studyin' a book," he explained, "I been thinkin' I'd be more of a general detective. I've got fingerprints down pretty fine and I want—"

"You long for more worlds to conquer. Go in and win. Get more degrees of exactitude—it's a good thing for you. And I'm glad to have you work with me. You have ideas—and I never knew it before."

"Thanks, McGee. Now, let's tot up what steers we've got. Aside from the Doll-baby and the Jessup admirer of hers, who else is a possibility? Anybody?"

"Well, there's Mr. Thorndike himself. I incline a little to him. How about the outraged husband coming in and finding his wife annoyed by the bold, bad Vane?"

"Not good enough. He'd knock the man down—same's he did you—and lug his wife off home. For if, as you said, the Thorndikes are not coo-ey coo-ey birds, surely he wouldn't do murder for her sake. And, too, he wanted that play from Vane—so of course he wouldn't kill him."

"Right enough. Then there are just two more people who we know were here during the afternoon. Dan Larkin and Miss Barr."

"Yes. But Larkin was here early, and Miss Barr after that, and they were both gone before Mrs. Thorndike appeared on the scene."

"That lets them out. We've no evidence to deny that. Also, Mr. Larkin could have no motive, having secured the play he wanted, and Miss Barr, so far as we know, had no reason to wish Vane ill."

"Could she have been jealous of the little lady?"

"She could have been—she may be, but we've no evidence of it, and, too, the elevator girl says no woman came up here after five o'clock except Mrs. Thorndike."

"That's probably the truth, though I wouldn't trust that girl as far as I could see her—and I'm near-sighted, too. Well, there's small use in theorizing, the next thing to do is to stick to our investigations."

"Meaning?"

"Oh, just nosing about—questioning people—and if we can't find the least reason to look elsewhere, come back to Lady Thorndike, and put Jessup through a third degree to find out what he really did do."

"Somebody's coming," McGee said, hearing a step in the hall. "Go to the door, will you Breen?"

The somebody proved to be Roly Ross, who came in with a rather blustering manner.

"Look here," he began. "Are you people going to do anything about this murder business or aren't you? I inherit all Mal Vane's estate and I feel it's up to me to avenge his taking off. I'm not a sentimental guy, usually, but when a relative of mine gets murdered, I want to know who did it and have the satisfaction of seeing him punished. Nearly twenty-four hours have passed, and no arrest yet. No suspect, even. If he had been lured away or if the circumstances were more complicated, there might be some excuse for your delay. But Mallory was killed right here in his own studio, in broad daylight. Only two or three people are known to have been here, and yet you can't make any progress toward a solution of the case! Screw loose somewhere, seems to me."

"A good many screws are loose," said McGee, with a conciliatory air, "but we're trying to tighten them up, Mr. Ross. I understand your impatience, it's most natural, but—well, at present, our investigations point to a lady ——"

"The little Thorndike beauty?"

"Yes."

"Gee whiz! Well, look here, then, let's let up on the search. I've never seen the lady, but from what I hear she's a marvel. And if Mallory was bothering her—oh, shucks, call off the hunt."

"We can't do that, Mr. Ross. Just because a suspect is young and pretty we can't refuse to believe in her guilt. To be sure, if she used that dagger in self-defense, she will probably pay no penalty, but the matter must be cleared up."

"Well, go ahead and clear it up, then. But can't you people get out of this place? I've a lot to do looking over papers and things, and I'd like the place to myself. Mr. Larkin is coming 'round to look over some papers. He says there's a lot of manuscript belonging to the play he bought and he wants to hunt it out. So, you see we could dispense with the presence of the police."

"I see, Mr. Ross, and there's nothing left for us to do here, I think." McGee looked around thoughtfully. "We've scoured the place for clues or evidence until I think there's nothing more to be found. But if there is, you'll probably find it, and can report to us. Here's Mr. Larkin now."

Dan Larkin entered, greeting the man in his bluff, hearty way.

"Guess I won't bother anybody if I go over some of Vane's portfolios, will I?" he asked.

"Not a bit," Ross assured him. "These friends of ours are just about going, anyway, and you can work uninterruptedly all you like. That filing cabinet over there seems to have a lot of plays in it."

"Yes, I know where Vane kept everything. He was really methodical enough though his papers always seemed to be in a state of chaos. But they are arranged after a system, and I understand. I'll tell you, though, Ross, there are some unfinished plays here that will be valuable to you—if you can get them worked out by the right man."

"We'll go into all that later," Ross said. "I want to get the financial end of the estate fixed up, then I'll look after the literary assets."

"We'll be going now, then," and McGee nodded to Breen. "I suppose, Mr. Larkin, you can't give us a glimmer of light on the murder matter?"

"Not a glim, Mr. McGee. Where do you stand now?"

"Our only approach to a suspect is—I hate to say it—but it's little Mrs. Thorndike."

Larkin gave a startled exclamation.

"No!" he cried, "not that little rosebud girl!"

"She's the only suspect," said McGee, inexorably, as he watched Larkin closely.

"My Heavens! You can't suspect that innocent young thing! Why, man, you're crazy!"

"No, I'm not. By the way, Mr. Larkin, I've been told that you were seen coming toward this house yesterday between five and six. That's the important time, you know."

"Yes, I did. About half past five—or quarter to six, I should say it was. I was coming over to ask Vane about these papers I'm going to hunt up now. But ——"

"Well, go on."

"But I saw Guy Thorndike just entering the building. I didn't want to meet him just then, for Vane had sold me the play earlier in the afternoon and I knew Guy would be sore about it. So I turned 'round and went home. That's all about that."

"I see. And what time was this?"

"Must have been between five-thirty and six—that's as near as I can place it. Thorndike admits he was here, doesn't he?"

"Oh, yes ——"

"Well, as Vane was killed then or soon after, why don't you suspect Thorndike? Why nail it on his wife?"

Larkin spoke savagely, and McGee saw at once that here was another victim to the charms of the lovely little lady.

Having seen her himself, the detective was not surprised at any man's falling in love with her. Nor was he surprised that each and every one of them tried to shield her from suspicion.

Yet it was hard to think of Guy Thorndike as the criminal.

"It seems to rest between the two," McGee said, after a pause. "May it not be that Mr. Thorndike sought his wife here, found her in Vane's company, and——"

"Look here," said Breen, "you know Mr. Thorndike said that as he arrived he heard a woman's voice and he heard Vane telling her to hide. Well, he said he had no idea who the woman was—and he hadn't when he was outside the door. But, of course, he found her out, even if she was hidden, and in the crisis that followed, Vane was killed by one or the other of the Thorndikes."

"Or both," offered McGee.

"Yes," agreed Breen, in conclusion. "Mrs. Thorndike may have fingered the dagger in order to efface her husband's finger marks ——"

"Oh, come now," said Ross, "that's romancing. Now, look here, did the Thorndikes go home together?"

"No," said McGee, "they didn't. I don't know exactly how Mrs. Thorndike got home, her mind

was conveniently hazy on that subject, as on many others. But I'll find out the details of this thing. Something tells me we needn't get out from under the Thorndike roof-tree to find the murderer."

"Nor the motive," added Breen.

The detectives went away, and McGee went straight to the Thorndike house, determined to find out some important truths.

He was received in the library. Thorndike was courteous, offered him a cigar, and then awaited the detective's errand.

"I want straight talk, Mr. Thorndike," McGee said, "no beating about the bush or evasion of the truth."

"Yes," said Guy, not at all helpfully.

Truly, he had a knack of making one feel ill at ease.

But the McGee puppy was at his root, and he tugged away doggedly.

"You were at Mr. Vane's studio yesterday afternoon between five and six?"

"I've told you that, Mr. McGee, I even went 'round to the studio this morning to tell you that."

"Yes—that's why I doubt it."

McGee looked for an outburst, but not even a word answered him.

"You're a strange man, Mr. Thorndike," he

said, looking curiously at the inscrutable face of the actor.

Guy looked up wearily. "I wish you'd come to business," he said. "You surely didn't come here to comment on my idiosyncrasies."

"No, sir, I didn't. I came to accuse you of the murder of Mallory Vane and to warn you that anything you say may be used against you."

Thorndike gave a slight, grim smile.

"Then I'd better not say anything," he returned.

"I'm afraid you'll have to say some things. Did you kill Vane?"

"My dear man, do you expect me to stick my head into the noose? If I did kill Vane, I've no intention of admitting it! You must find out for yourself."

"And I shall. But you must answer a few questions."

"No, I need not. An accused man is on the defensive. I am privileged to call in legal counsel."

"Oh, well, call all you like. But, see here, Mr. Thorndike, we don't really suspect you. That was a feeler. We suspect Mrs. Thorndike."

This speech brought no reply save a calm gaze as if the information was of no interest.

McGee was beginning to learn that Guy Thorn-

dike made no response to observations, a direct question was necessary to get a reply.

"Was Mrs. Thorndike at the Vane studio when you were there yesterday afternoon?"

"I have already told you there was some woman there but I did not see her."

"Was Mrs. Thorndike there yesterday afternoon when you were there?"

McGee was learning how to treat this exasperating witness.

"I have since had reason to believe she was," Thorndike said, with evident reluctance."

"Did you bring her home?"

"I did not."

"You came home by yourself?"

"Yes."

"At what time?"

"That's a question I can rarely answer. I never know what time it is. Few people do. It's futile to ask people what time they did this or that."

"You're right. I've found it so. Well, about what time, then?"

"I've told you before—some time around six o'clock. I was at home perhaps an hour or so before dinner. I dine at seven."

"And Mrs. Thorndike? Was she here for dinner?"

"Mrs. Thorndike did not dine with me last evening. She had dinner in her own apartments."

"Does she usually dine with you?"

"Really, Mr. McGee—there is a limit, I imagine, to the questions you may properly ask."

"There is, Mr. Thorndike, and this is within the limit. Does she?"

"I cannot agree with you. But I have no real objection to answering. No, we do not usually dine together. It suits our convenience and our preference to dine separately."

"I see. And at what time did Mrs. Thorndike get home for dinner?"

"I've not the slightest idea."

"And you left her at Vane's studio! And she came home later! And you don't know at what time?"

"You heard me say so."

"May I see Mrs. Thorndike?"

"Not today, please. She is worn out and overcome by this tragedy. She is on the verge of a nervous breakdown, and is really ill. I'm going to ask you, McGee, as man to man, to let her be, at least until tomorrow. She won't get away, but she is a frail little woman, and I really hope you can give her another night's rest before grilling her. Can't I tell you what you want to know?"

"You can, but you won't," was what McGee thought, but he said:

"Why, yes, if you will. First of all, are you jealous of your wife?"

"Not at all." The answer was quietly spoken with no inflection of resentment.

"Yet all the men admire her."

"Naturally, as she is a very beautiful woman and of great charm."

"Yes, I saw that for myself. Did you know that she went frequently to Vane's studio?"

It was after a slight but noticeable pause that Thorndike said, "Oh, yes. They were collaborating on a play for me."

"With your consent and approval?"

"Certainly."

"You had no fear that Vane would make love to her? Forgive me, Mr. Thorndike, but these matters must be settled."

"No, I had no fear of it."

But Guy Thorndike's face had turned pale, his voice was wooden; he spoke like a man saying a lesson he had committed to memory.

"Then you let yourself in for what happened. Mr. Thorndike, there can be no doubt but that your wife was either the means or the cause of Mallory

Vane's death. I mean either she killed him or he was killed for her sake."

"By whom, in the latter case?"

The actor had recovered his abnormal calm, he asked the question in slow, level tones.

"By you, or by Mr. Jessup."

"Ah, Jessup is a new factor in the case."

"No, he has been in my mind all along."

"Indeed. Well, Mr. McGee, what is in your mind doesn't interest me in the least. I have come to the conclusion that you have no well-founded suspicion of anybody; that you come here to quiz me and to find out some evidence on which to base a theory. I deny all your accusations, I resent all your implications, and I ask you to leave my house. If not peaceably then—I'm sorry, but it may have to be forcibly."

McGee saw again the Thorndike who had knocked him down earlier that day, and he hastened to forestall any repetition of the conditions.

"Not quite so fast," he said, softly, "be a little careful, sir. As you remember, I have accused your wife of this murder and you have said nothing to exculpate her from the suspicion. Have you anything to say?"

"I asked you, Mr. McGee, to let that question

rest till tomorrow. Please have enough regard for the lady to consent to this."

"Sorry, sir, but I can't do it. I'd be glad to, Lord knows, but I've got to do my duty. However, I'll let my interview with Mrs. Thorndike wait until tomorrow, if you'll give me your word of honor that I may see her then."

Thorndike looked baffled, and McGee sensed at once that he had intended to put his wife beyond the reach of her inquisitors before the suggested interview could take place.

"Very well," he said, after a moment, "I give you my word for that."

"Then, one more question, Mr. Thorndike, and I'll go. You left Vane's studio yesterday afternoon at or about six o'clock?"

"Yes."

"You left Mrs. Thorndike there?"

"I have not said so."

"When you left the studio was Mr. Vane alive—or dead?"

There was a long pause. The two men looked deep into one another's eyes.

Then Thorndike spoke.

"Dead," he said.

"Who killed him?"

"I did."

CHAPTER XIII

THE THORNDIKES

MCGEE's well-trained features rarely registered the surprise he felt, but in this instance he plainly showed his amazement.

"You!" he exclaimed. "Do you mean that, Mr. Thorndike?"

"Certainly I do. It's my confession. Now, you will take the necessary steps."

"Steps?" McGee looked bewildered.

"You heard me!" Thorndike frowned. "When a man confesses to a murder, I assume there is a certain legal procedure to be carried out."

"Yes—oh, yes. But you see, I don't believe you committed that murder."

"You don't? And why not?"

"Because you came 'round to us this morning with a—a different story."

"Ah, yes, but that was before you suspected Mrs. Thorndike of the crime. A man may deny his guilt, but not when he finds that thereby an innocent person is suspected."

"Oh, I see. Well, may I ask you for some details?"

"Some. But if you ask any questions I don't

care to answer, I have the privilege, of course, of waiting until I can get legal counsel."

"Of course. Then, first, granting that you killed Mallory Vane, why are not your fingerprints on that dagger?"

"Because I wrapped my handkerchief 'round it so there shouldn't be."

"And your motive for this crime?"

"Insulting remarks he made about my wife. I lost my temper and lost my head. In my sudden fury, I snatched up that devilish pen thing and in an instant it was all over. I own up frankly and I am ready to pay the penalty."

It sounded plausible enough. McGee knew how sudden and fierce Thorndike's flashes of rage were. When he had knocked down the detective that very morning, it had been on the quick impulse of anger—and at the same affront, an aspersion on his wife.

Yet, somehow, McGee wasn't sure about this thing. His intuition told him that Thorndike was shouldering the guilt to spare his wife.

McGee was not sure himself that Mrs. Thorndike was guilty but suspicion now pointed to her, and it was but natural, he supposed, that her husband should prefer to shield her even at his own disgrace.

He decided to be frank in the matter.

"You see, Mr. Thorndike," he said, "I have a notion that you're confessing to a crime of which you are innocent."

"And why should you think that?"

"I think you're taking it on yourself to shield your wife."

"You have no right or reason to think that, Mr. McGee, and—if you hint it again, I shall knock you down."

"One knock down per diem is enough from you, Mr. Thorndike"; the detective looked a bit rueful and rubbed his head which was still sore. "But the truth or falsity of your confession is not altogether my business, I'll accept it at its face value, and the courts can do the rest. You went 'round to the studio, then, as you said, yesterday afternoon, and you saw no one except Mr. Vane?"

"That's right. I saw no one else, nor did I hear anyone. Before I entered I thought I heard a woman's voice and I'm sure I heard Vane tell her to hide. I believe now, that the woman was my wife. She was there for an innocent purpose, but Vane represented to me that she was not—so, as I told you, in my fury at his words, I snatched at this diabolical pen and lunged at him. The thing is so slender and sharp it sank into his breast before I

realized what I had done. I am sorry I killed him—but it is done, and I must stand the consequences. That is all I have to say, Mr. McGee. Do you want me to go with you now? ”

“Go where? ”

“To Headquarters—or wherever I’m supposed to be taken.”

“Well, no, Mr. Thorndike, I don’t think you need go now. I’m assuming that the tale you’ve told me is true—whether it is or not—and I will see what the Headquarters people have to say to it. You’ll be here if we want you? ”

“Yes, you’ll find me right here.”

“And, the—the fingerprints of Mrs. Thorndike that we found on the dagger and also on the book of Hamlet ——”

“Naturally she fingered the Hamlet volume, that was part of the errand on which she went there. And she must have fingered the dagger, after I—after I left there.”

“I see.” McGee was beginning to adopt this confession, adapt it to his theories and was determined to be adept about it.

Yet he did not believe implicitly in the veracity of Guy Thorndike.

It might all be true and it might not. He must not give up his worrying at the root.

"And the telephone book," he pursued. "You know Mrs. Thorndike's red fingerprints are all over that."

"It is surely believable that, having discovered Vane dead—or dying she would at once try to telephone for help. It is also quite conceivable that in her excitement and terror she should be unable to succeed in doing so."

"There's a hiatus there," McGee said, musingly. "There's nearly an hour to be accounted for before your arrival home and your wife's. What was she doing all that time?"

"Lord, man, I don't know. Maybe she walked home. Maybe, in a dazed condition she wandered about, trying to find the house. The circumstances were certainly enough to distract her—it's a wonder her mind wasn't completely unhinged—if, indeed, it wasn't."

"She says you were not at the Vane studio while she was there."

Thorndike pondered on this.

"Perhaps she didn't know I was there—perhaps she did, and is denying it to divert suspicion from me."

"Does she know you are suspected? Are you suspected?"

McGee shot these questions suddenly, and Thorndike hesitated before replying.

Then he said, "Look here, Mr. McGee, if I am suspected, you've no right to try to trap me into further confession. And, why should you? Haven't I told you I killed Mallory Vane? What more do you want?"

"I want proof of it—I want conviction of it. I don't believe you killed Vane at all, and I do believe Mrs. Thorndike did. By the way, Roland Ross says if Mrs. Thorndike is the suspect, we are to call off the whole case."

Thorndike seemed to pay no attention to this.

"Have you told Mrs. Thorndike you suspect her?" he said.

"I've told her that unless she comes through, she will be definitely suspected of the crime, or of guilty knowledge of it."

"What did she reply?"

"She said she didn't know whether she killed him or not."

"Poor child! Probably she doesn't know. I tell you she is not responsible for her statements. Whatever she saw at the studio has so upset her that she is nearly crazy. Hers is a delicately-constructed nature, a queer mixture of child and woman.

Moreover, she is inexperienced and ignorant of many matters that are as open books to more worldly people."

"She seems to be. She said she would like to see Mr. Jessup for a—a sort of conference about these matters."

"Jessup? Pete Jessup? Why in the world does she want to see him?"

"We were speaking of lawyers—of legal counsel, and she said she would rather see Jessup."

"Well, there's no reason why she shouldn't see him if she wants to. But don't propose it to her, unless she asks again. It may have been a mere passing vagary of her poor little disturbed brain."

"Perhaps. At any rate, it would be far better for her to consult with you, and you two could agree on the lawyer you want, and tell the whole tale to him. Both tales."

"What do you mean by both tales?"

"Yours and Mrs. Thorndike's."

"Do you think they differ?"

"Perhaps not in the main, but certainly in details."

"Very well, McGee." Guy Thorndike spoke wearily, "leave me now, please—I can't run away. Tell your Chief of my confession, and take what

steps are usual. I will get legal advice, and I'll see to it that Mrs. Thorndike is fully exonerated."

"Yes, and that's what you're doing it all for," McGee observed to himself, but to the other he said nothing of the sort.

As soon as the detective had gone, Thorndike called Webb and asked him to summon Mrs. Thorndike to the library.

Instead, Lamb appeared.

"You can't have that poor blessed child to pester," she declared, entering and sitting down, for she had privileges not accorded to an ordinary servant. "She's asleep now, but even if she were not, I shouldn't let her see you. You take away what little remnant of calm and comfort she has left. You stir her up with your cold, contemptuous airs, and she gets more and more desolate and despairing. Some day I shall tell her the truth, and take her away from you."

"No, Lamb, don't do that. She is better off here than she could be anywhere else. Especially now, since this murder business is in the air."

"In the air! I should say it was. Who killed that man?"

"Do you think my wife did?"

Lamb stared at him. Her eyes gleamed with concentrated fury, and she said, in low, tense tones,

"the whole blackness of your life is in that sentence!"

"Then you think her innocent?" he said calmly.

"The depth of your wickedness is not in the question of her guilt or innocence—but in what you called her," the woman said, looking at him intently.

Thorndike flushed, but he only said, lightly, "These things are not your business, Lamb. Well, perhaps no good purpose would be served by my seeing Mrs. Thorndike just now. But, if she ever asks to see me, let me know. Meanwhile, I am told she would like to see Mr. Jessup. Do you know this?"

"Yes," Lamb looked thoughtful. "Yes, I think she does wish to see Mr. Jessup."

"Then let her do so. Bring about the interview in any way you see fit. Is he in love with her?"

"Oh, yes, I think so. Who isn't?"

"Is she with him?"

"No! She's in love with no one but yourself."

Guy Thorndike sighed, but his only verbal response was a half articulate "H'm," and with a quick gesture of his hand he dismissed the woman.

Lamb went to the rooms of her mistress and as soon as Prillilgirl woke, she asked if she should arrange for a call from Mr. Jessup.

And wonderingly, came a quick, glad assent.

"You think Mr. Thorndike won't mind?" she asked.

"I know he won't," Lamb returned. "That's all right. Shall I telephone for Mr. Jessup to come?"

"Yes—as soon as he can."

And that evening Pete Jessup came to call.

He was received in Mrs. Thorndike's pretty sitting room, and his hostess, in a white evening gown, received him cordially.

"I am so glad to see you," she said, holding out both hands.

Small wonder Pete Jessup was bowled over by the lovely vision. He kissed the two pink palms, and as he sat down, looked about for Thorndike.

"We're alone," she said, understanding. "I—I want to talk to you a little about—about—you know."

"Yes, I know," he tried to speak casually. "But, is it necessary? Must we touch on unpleasant subjects?"

"Why, yes," her eyes opened wide, "that's what I got you over here for."

"All right, then—what's the principal point?"

"Who killed Mr. Vane?"

Jessup looked at her. His eyes were kind, his smile was kind, when he spoke his voice was

kind. Although he adored this lovely child, although his very soul was consumed with passion at the mere sight of her, he concealed it completely, he gave the impression of a kind friend and sympathetic counsellor.

“Why do you ask me that?” he temporized.

“Because I want to know what you think—what you believe ——” her voice sank lower, “what you know.”

“I think,” Jessup said slowly, “I’d better tell you the truth.”

“Do, please,” she returned, quietly.

“Then, I can only say that I don’t know. I came into the studio and found Vane’s dead body. I went to the booth to telephone for help, and there I found—you.”

“Yes, I know—and I was—unconscious?”

“Not quite that, but dazed, frightened, terrified almost out of your senses.”

“Then what happened?”

“Then I fixed you up as well as I could. I washed off some stains that showed on your gown, and then I telephoned for your maid to meet us ——”

“Yes, I know all that—but after that, after Lamb took me, what did you do?”

“Oh, I went back to the studio, and —well, I

may as well confess, I tried to obliterate all traces of your presence there. I hid the telephone book that showed your fingerprints, a—and I manufactured some false evidence against some mysterious unknown. I admit my plans didn't work out quite as I meant them to, but I did the best I could."

"You thought I killed him? "

"I did not! But I thought, I *knew*, that others might think you did, and that's what I tried to guard against."

"Did you suspect my—my husband at all? "

"Guy? I should say not! Why, he came 'round right away and told of his presence there ——"

"At about the time Mr. Vane was killed——"

"Yes, but before it. He knew nothing of it—he went away, leaving Vane alive."

"Then—then, don't you see, I must have done it! "

"Don't you know whether you did or not? " Pete spoke very gently.

"No—no, I don't know. How can I know? It's all a blur, a haze—I can't see it clearly, I can't remember ——"

"Then don't try to give any evidence to anyone. I mean to any official person. Haven't you talked this over with Guy? "

"No—you see, I don't see much of Guy when—when he's busy."

Jessup stared. On the outs? These two?

It was well known among their crowd that there was a sort of queer arrangement in the Thorndike house, but any hint of curiosity had been so curtly and abruptly shut up by Thorndike, that few dared venture a second time. But for them not to talk over this tragedy was incredible!

"Don't you think it would be better for you to do so?" he asked. "Talk it over with Guy, I mean. He's the right and proper one to advise you, to tell you what to say to the—to the officials—they've interviewed you, haven't they? Hasn't McGee been here?"

"Yes—but I don't know what I said to him. I'm queer about it—about it all. I can't seem to remember—how did we come down from the studio? In the elevator?"

"No, I brought you down the stairs, as being less conspicuous."

"Thank you. You were very good to me, I do thank you. You are about the only friend I have—"

"Oh, don't say that. There's Agatha Barr——"

"Yes," wistfully, "I wish she were more friendly. I don't think she likes me much." Prillilgirl sighed. "Life is very hard, isn't it?"

“Life hard! For you? Oh, it ought not to be!”

Pete Jessup was a poet and a dreamer. His usual thoughts and feelings were far removed from subjects like murder and its attendant horrors. It was inevitable, now, that he should shake off such things and drift toward a more congenial topic. Almost involuntarily, he whispered:

“Life is only hard when it holds no romance.”

“My life holds no romance.” The brown eyes were sad.

“There is no real romance but love. You know this?”

“No,” she looked at him inquiringly.

Jessup lost his head a little.

“Let me teach you,” he whispered, “to love.”

“Oh, do!” and the great eyes looked earnestly into his own. “Do teach me.”

Unable to resist temptation, Pete went on. “It is not difficult to learn—and perhaps you know already.”

“No, I’m afraid I don’t——” and Prillilgirl looked troubled.

“There must be one—just one human being for you—in all the world. Can you imagine that?”

She glanced up shyly and then quickly dropped her eyes.

“Yes,” she said, softly, “I can.”

"Then you must feel a thrill of joy, merely at being in his presence ——"

"Yes."

"Which becomes a real and vivid rapture at his nearness."

"Yes——" The brown eyes were not raised, but a pinker flush came to the roseleaf cheeks.

"You must feel an ecstasy of joy at the clasp of his hand."

Prillilgirl shook her head and raised pathetic eyes to her teacher.

"I never tried that."

"Oh——" Jessup threw discretion to the winds, "let me take your hand."

"Yes," and with almost an eager gesture, she laid her hand in his.

"Does it thrill you?" Pete constrained himself to give but the lightest pressure.

"No; not now, of course. But, perhaps—I could learn. I am not bred so dull but I can learn."

Jessup was in dead earnest now. "It isn't only physical, you know," he whispered, looking into her eyes. "You feel your heart expand like a flower——"

"Yes ——"

"Your very soul sings for joy, though it makes no sound ——"

"Yes."

"Can you learn all this?"

Prillilgirl withdrew her hands, and clasped them in her intensity. "I think so—oh, I hope so!"

"You must feel that you were created just for him alone."

"Yes—oh, yes."

"And that he is only for you ——"

"That is not so easy," and she gave a troubled glance, as if trying hard to believe an impossible thing.

"Oh, yes, dear, it is easy. Think so, now!" Again he took her hands and compelled her eyes to meet his own.

"Do you think I may?" and the little hands trembled and the voice quivered.

"Yes, yes, indeed you may!" and as he gazed at the perfect face, Pete Jessup leaned toward it uncontrollably.

It was during this instructive conversation that Lamb had neared the closed door of the reception room, and the few words she overheard caused her to open the door quickly and without waiting to tap at it.

Prillilgirl looked up quite unconcerned. "What is it, Lamb?" she said.

"Mr. Larkin to see you, Mrs. Thorndike. Shall I bring him up?"

"Yes, surely. I want to see Mr. Larkin very

much. Good night, Mr. Jessup, and thank you for your real friendship and kindness. You have helped me a lot."

And it was characteristic of Pete Jessup that he murmured his good night words and went away at once.

Dan Larkin came in, big, blustering, but striving to tone down his voice and manners into some accordance with the delicate charm of the room and the dainty fragile appearance of the hostess who waited to greet him.

"Good evening," she said, calmly, giving him a look of inquiry but untinged with coquetry or even friendliness. She did not like the big man with his bald head and pale eyes, but she wanted to talk to him.

"Ah, fair lady, beautiful as usual, it is good of you to see me ——"

"I want to see you, Mr. Larkin. I want you to help me."

"That's the only thing in the world I want to do. Tell me how."

"I want you to help me find out who killed Mr. Vane."

"The only thing you could ask of me that I wouldn't do willingly and gladly."

"And why not this? Don't you want to learn who killed him? Or do you know?"

"Don't you know?"

"I—I am not sure."

"Don't be sure. Don't try to be sure. Look here, Mr. Ross, who is Vane's heir, wants to call off the investigation entirely. Let him do it. I say, let him do it. Drop all thought, all talk of the subject. You understand?"

"No, I don't understand. But will it, can it be dropped?"

"If you say so——" he gave her a strange look.

"If I say so?" she spoke in utter astonishment.

"Yes. Oh, don't pretend not to understand. You agree to my proposition, and the whole affair will be hushed up. Otherwise ——"

"Otherwise what?"

"That precious husband of yours will find himself in the Electric Chair."

She gave a little, quickly-stifled scream. "What do you mean?"

"Just that. You know Guy did for Vane. You know it must come out—unless——"

"Unless ——" she merely breathed the word, the terror in her eyes growing deeper.

"Unless you give me what I want. And I want

—you! Nothing less! I want you, you—yourself, and I'm bound to have you. You know Guy Thorndike is no husband of yours! You're not really his wife. Those things can be adjusted, and shall be—do you hear? And shall be! And you shall marry me and nobody need ever know Guy did that thing. Come to me, darling, I'll be so good to you. Don't look like that."

For Prillilgirl was cowering against the wall, her face full of horror at his words, but more, with a dawning look of sudden knowledge and sudden realization.

CHAPTER XIV

CORINNE'S STORY

THE inquest had been adjourned in order to get more and impartial evidence. McGee held that most of the witnesses were too interested to tell entirely true stories, and he hoped by quizzing employees or tenants of the big studio building to get further light on the mystery.

He felt pretty sure that Vane had been killed by one of the Thorndikes, but he didn't know which one. It was hard to think of the little lady as a murderess but she was a strange little piece, and when a pure, innocent woman is made love to by a determined man it is not beyond the imagination that she might turn on him with a sudden murderous impulse.

It had been established that Mallory Vane came to his death by the one stab of the queer penholder known as the Devil's Dagger.

The time of the crime had been accepted as about six o'clock.

McGee found some discrepancies in Jessup's story of his arrival at seven and that of the elevator girl who had said she brought him up at six. This the detective meant to straighten out, but he was already

sure that Jessup had told the falsehood as part of his rather elaborate plan to shield Mrs. Thorndike. Or Mr. Thorndike. It was a sure thing that both Thorndikes were in the studio at about six o'clock, and unless some other definite suspect showed up soon, matters must go ahead on the present information.

Ross tried valiantly to have the investigation stopped, but it was now too late for that, and McGee pressed forward. Both he and Breen hoped to find another potential criminal, but hadn't, so far, done so.

Pete Jessup was indefatigable in his efforts to turn the tide of suspicion away from the Thorndikes. Indeed, he tried so hard that he came to be considered a nuisance and was ignored by the detectives. But this didn't dampen his enthusiasm, and he trotted about from Thorndike to Larkin, and from him to Ross, and from him to Agatha Barr, in wild endeavor to get some new bit of evidence or information. He was desperately in love with Prillil-girl but he respected her position as Thorndike's wife, and determined not to lose his head again, as he certainly had when he saw her alone.

He would be her knight errant—Jessup was of the romantic sort—but he would serve her with no hope of future favors.

So he blundered along, trying in every way possible to hunt out somebody who might have killed Vane, yet who was outside the friendly circle.

McGee, on the other hand, was sure that the killing was done by one or other of the Thorndikes, and whichever did it, of course the other knew of it. He couldn't quite straighten out the circumstances, he couldn't see how Guy could have killed Vane and then gone away leaving his wife at the studio, but these things he proposed to find out.

So to the Thorndike house he went, determined to get at the truth of their movements at the fatal hour.

Guy received him in the library.

The actor looked worn and weary. His usual inscrutable calm was not much in evidence. He had a new air that was nervous, almost flurried.

"You again," he said, by way of greeting.

"Yes, Mr. Thorndike," McGee returned, looking serious. "Matters can't be delayed much longer. Three days now since Mallory Vane was killed, and no evidence against anybody but yourself or—your wife."

"But I've confessed, man, what more do you want?"

"Nothing, I guess. I hoped, Mr. Thorndike, that you were really innocent, and had confessed to

shield—someone else. I hoped that your suspicions were wrong, and that I could find a new way to look. But I can't. Every trail leads back here, and so —"

"So you're here to arrest me. Well, go ahead."

"No," a low voice sounded from the doorway, and Prillilgirl came into the room.

She was pale, but a small red spot glowed on either cheek and her little white teeth bit into her lower lip.

"No, Mr. McGee," she went on, as she sank into a chair that Guy placed for her, "you are not to arrest Mr. Thorndike, he is innocent. I killed Mr. Vane and I have been too cowardly to confess. But now I will tell the truth, and you must not arrest my husband."

"Corinne," Guy spoke sternly, "don't talk nonsense. Go back to your room. I will attend to these matters. You have no concern in them."

"No concern in a murder I committed myself?" The great dark eyes were raised to his inquiringly, as if she were asking an ordinary question. "Please address your inquiries to me, Mr. McGee. If I fail to satisfy you of my truthfulness, that will be time enough to accuse Mr. Thorndike."

"Stop, McGee," Guy said, commandingly. "I will not allow this. Mrs. Thorndike is completely upset by this whole matter. She is not herself. She

had a heat stroke the day of the—of Vane's death, and she has not been really responsible since."

Prillilgirl looked at him calmly.

"I am quite responsible, Guy," she said; "you will both see that I am, if you will listen to my story. Mr. McGee, in the interests of justice, I demand to be heard."

"Let her talk, Mr. Thorndike, if it is the wandering of a disturbed brain we shall both recognize it as such."

"I will not let her talk—I forbid it." Guy rose and took Prillilgirl by the arm, firmly, and not altogether gently. He was angry and he showed it.

"Corinne, how dare you come in here and talk like this? I did not summon you——"

"I—I know you didn't——" Her eyes showed a sudden vague fear, but apparently she conquered it, for she drew away from him with a gesture of quiet dignity.

McGee looked at her with amazement. There was more to this little piece of femininity than he had thought.

"Let me alone, Guy," she said. "I dare come here because it is right. Because the story I'm going to tell is true. Because you have confessed to this crime in order to shield me from the consequences of my own sin. But I can't let you do it. To live

knowing you had sacrificed yourself for me would be worse than to die."

"This is mere theatricalism," Thorndike said, coldly. "Don't try melodrama, Corinne, it isn't in your line. Mr. McGee, I repeat, you must not take Mrs. Thorndike seriously. Surely you realize now she is irresponsible."

"Well, I haven't seen any undeniable proof of it," the detective returned, eyeing them both closely but discreetly. "Suppose we hear Mrs. Thorndike's story. That will certainly prove or disprove your opinion of her sanity."

"Yes, it will," and Corinne nodded her head with decision. "Now, keep still, Guy, and listen."

But she addressed herself to the detective.

"You see, Mr. McGee, it was this way. I want to tell you the story straight, and simply—for, then, if there is any excuse or favor for me, you'll find it. I was writing a play for Mr. Thorndike in collaboration with Mr. Vane——"

"Were you really doing this, Mrs. Thorndike? I mean, had you started on the work?"

"Well, we were settling preliminaries. We meant to make it something like Hamlet—I mean, in tone, you see——"

In spite of the gravity of the occasion both men

involuntarily smiled, but as quickly became grave as the tense, steady little voice went on.

"Yes, and so we read Hamlet together, although I know it almost by heart. But Mr. Vane didn't and he asked me to pick out some of the points where our play would be like it——"

"Corinne, I won't stand it! Stop talking this utter rubbish. Go to your room! I will finish with Mr. McGee."

She turned an indifferent glance toward him.

"Be quiet, Guy," she said, evenly. "So, Mr. McGee, I went there about five o'clock and we read the play for a while and then Mr. Vane——" she hesitated as if choosing her words, "then Mr. Vane began to make love to me. He put his arms round me and kissed me, and I—I didn't know what to do. It was silly to scream, and I'm not silly. It was useless to try to get away from him, for as you know he was a strong man. But just as I was at my wits' end what to do, we heard my husband's step in the hall, and heard his voice demanding admittance. I was scared to death, for though he could rescue me from my tormentor, I was afraid to face his anger at finding me there."

She looked squarely at Guy as she said this, but his face was absolutely devoid of expression of any kind. A stranger might have been telling the

story for all the interest he showed. His gaze was fixed on an opposite corner of the room and his whole attitude was that of a man deep in thought on subjects far removed from his present surroundings.

Prilligirl sighed as she turned back to McGee.

“Well, when Mr. Vane realized that Mr. Thorn-dike was outside, he said to me quickly, ‘You must hide!’ and acting, I suppose, on a sudden thought, he opened the door of the telephone booth and pushed me inside and shut the door. It was dark in there and terribly hot and stuffy, but I knew Mr. Vane would get rid of his caller just as soon as he possibly could and let me out. Oh, how I suffered in there! The terrible situation, the fear that my husband would discover I was there, and the dread of what might happen after he left—oh, I was nearly crazy.”

Still no recognition of the speaker or of her story on the inscrutable face of the silent man who sat apart, aloof.

“And so,” she went on, “it was so hot, and the air of the booth became so close I could scarcely breathe, and I didn’t dare open the door, even a crack——”

“Could you see the men outside the booth?” McGee interrupted her.

"Not distinctly, for the door has a pane of clouded glass—that ripply, wavy glass, you know?"

"I know."

"And, beside that, the booth is almost in the corner and doesn't face out toward the main room. There's just a small space between it and the end wall."

"Yes, I know it doesn't command a view of the room at all."

"No, but the sun was low, and the shadows were cast across the room, and I could see the two men——"

"Quarrelling?"

Prillilgirl looked suddenly aghast, as one who had deviated from her plan, who had said what she did not intend to say.

"Oh, no," she declared, quickly, "not that. They were discussing something earnestly,—of course, it was the question of Mr. Vane's play, the one Mr. Thorndike wanted to buy——"

"The one Mr. Larkin did buy?" said McGee quickly.

"Yes—but Mr. Vane told me he had sold that to Mr. Mortimer." She looked toward Guy, but he vouchsafed her no glance and showed no sign of having heard her last words.

"Could you hear their voices?" asked McGee, after a quick look at Thorndike.

"No, the telephone booth is soundproof, and, as I say, I dared not put the door ajar. But I just gathered from the shadows that they were discussing some matter."

"And then?" prompted the detective, gently.

"Then—" the lovely face grew tense in the effort to speak accurately and truthfully, "then—you see, it's a little hazy in my mind, because the booth was so hot and I was so upset generally, that I guess—I think—I fainted—that is, I didn't exactly faint, but I lost consciousness for a time—I remember putting my head down on my hands and then it's all a blank until——"

"Until——"

"Stop, Corinne!" Thorndike pointed an accusing finger at her. You may have told the truth up to this point but now you are going to falsify, I know it. I insist you shall not tell any more. That is all you know—after you lost consciousness you cannot possibly know what happened——"

"But I know what happened when I regained my senses!" The small face was mutinous, the scarlet lips were set in a determined line and the dark eyes flashed a sort of defiance—the defiance of a frightened fawn.

"Of course you do, and you must tell it," put in McGee, of no mind to lose the rest of this interesting tale.

"And I will tell it!" she said, bravely. "It is very awful, but it must be told. When I waked up, or came to myself, I heard no voices outside, so I knew my husband had gone. I hoped Mr. Vane had gone away too, and I opened the door and peeped out. Mr. Vane sat in the chair at his desk—writing."

"Writing? With the Devil's Dagger?"

"Yes." she shuddered. "He—he smiled and said, 'Wait till I finish this, and then I'll attend to your case,' He said it smilingly, and I was—I was so afraid of him I didn't know what to do. I suppose my fear gave me courage for I went straight up to him, and I said, 'Mr. Vane, I am going out of that door and home. Don't you dare attempt to stop me!'

"He laughed—he reached out and pulled me down on his knee—with his left arm—the dagger pen was still in his right hand—and as he leaned to kiss me—I was desperate, I was at the end of my rope, and—knowing perfectly well what I was doing, but realizing there was no other way to save myself from that man, I grabbed the dagger-pen from his right hand and plunged in into his heart—and I'm g-glad I did!"

She broke down for a moment, but after one or two convulsive sobs, she recovered her poise and continued, "There's my story, and that is the truth, Mr. McGee."

Still Thorndike did not look at her. He seemed to be weighing the evidence. Seemed to be unmoved yet undesiring of speech.

McGee was all on edge. He knew he must go slowly and warily or this high-strung personality before him would go to pieces, and he would not get the rest of the tale. Yet he must egg her on, or she would have a reaction and realize her own danger and perhaps pause for that reason.

"And then? Mrs. Thorndike," he said in a matter-of-fact tone, thinking that the best course to pursue.

"And then," she said, apparently taking her cue from his calmness, "I saw what I had done—and I didn't regret it—not then—and I jumped up—wondering what to do next. I've been reading detective stories—because—well, anyway, I've been reading them—and I know after a—after anybody is killed you ought to telephone for the police. So I went into the telephone booth, and I didn't know the Police's number and I tried to find it in the book and it was so dark—and I couldn't find the light-thing—and, well I guess that's when I had my heat

stroke, for I fell in a heap somehow, and I never knew anything else till Mr. Jessup opened the door."

"Mr. Jessup!"

This from Thorndike, his deep eyes flashing fire as he spoke.

"Yes, he came and lifted me up and was most kind to me."

"What did he say? What did he do?" Still Thorndike speaking, his look changing to a dull wonder.

"Oh, he was perfectly lovely. He saw Mr. Vane was dead, and he knew I had killed him, and he just put his whole mind on getting me away without anyone seeing me. You see, he didn't think I'd be suspected, and he thought the whole matter could be hushed up and nobody—that is, not any—anyone would—could——"

"Corinne! You are rambling—hush!" And Thorndike sprang to her side.

"I'm not!" She pulled herself together with a visible jerk. "Don't you dare touch me! I am—I may be a little nervous—a little incoherent—but I'm all right, Mr. McGee—Guy, could I have a glass of water?"

He turned impatiently to a side table and poured her a small glass of Vichy, adding a few drops of brandy.

"Drink that," he said, harshly. "And then, Corinne, for the last time, I beg of you to stop this rhodomontade! There's not a word of truth in it, McGee, she's fabricating the whole thing!"

"Mr. McGee knows better than that." The drink had revived the drooping little body, and the spirit was indomitable.

"Then, well, Mr. Jessup will tell you himself what he did. Oh, he'll tell when he knows I've told. Why shouldn't he? He cleaned off some blood spots from my frock," she gave a shudder, "and he found my hat for me and then he took me down stairs—so the elevator girl shouldn't see us—and we went out to the street and he hailed a taxi and took me to Lamb. Oh, yes, I forgot to tell you he telephoned Lamb first to come and meet us."

"Lamb meet you!" exclaimed Thorndike. "Where?"

"Somewhere on Broadway—I don't remember——"

"This is idiotic. Lamb never did anything of the sort!"

"Yes, she did. Ask her——"

"No, she didn't," but Guy's voice had grown less hard. "McGee, if you use, or even remember this nonsense of Mrs. Thorndike's I'll have you sued. It's utterly false in the main. She may have

been there, she may have been in the telephone booth—Jessup can settle that—but she never killed Vane—never! She's incapable of such an act—it would be impossible for her to accomplish it—no matter how vile the man may have been!”

“Then why is she saying all this?” McGee demanded.

“To shield me. She knows I killed Vane—probably saw me do it—of course I didn't know she was there—and in her wifely devotion,” Thorndike was not looking at the girl who sat staring at him—“she is ready to sacrifice herself for my sake.”

“Or you for hers,” said McGee, shrewdly. “It is a pretty situation, and one not unknown in the annals of law, when two people claim a crime each desirous to exonerate the other.”

“I know,” and Mrs. Thorndike nodded her lovely head wisely. “I've read of it in detective stories—and, in the books they always say, ‘well, since they suspect each other, neither one is guilty.’”

“Yes,” said Guy, eagerly, “that's true, McGee.”

“Far from true,” and Corinne looked at him; “it's only true when each suspects the other. We don't do that. You suspect me—but I don't suspect you. Mr. McGee,” she suddenly became very serious, “you must see the situation. Mr. Thorn-

dike is innocent, and it can be proved. I confess my guilt, and, to save me from its possible consequences, he is confessing to shield me. But he knows—" she turned and looked steadily at Guy, "he knows I did it. He will never admit this, so you must take up the matter from here. You must prove to the satisfaction of the authorities that I killed Mallory Vane and that Guy Thorndike is innocent of crime."

Her soft, sweet voice was steady and earnest, though her red lower lip was quivering.

"You say Mr. Thorndike's innocence can be proved," McGee put in quickly, for he was making the most of this marvelous opportunity to get at the truth. "How?"

"In many ways. First, if he had struck down Mr. Vane, would he have gone away from the studio without learning what woman was hidden there? He knew someone was—he had heard that before he entered. How did he know but it was someone who would witness against him? Or, more likely, someone he must protect? Mr. Thorndike did not dream that it was I who was hidden there, but he did know it was some woman, and it would not be possible to his chivalrous nature to go away and leave that woman—any woman to come out

of her hiding place and be confronted with the fearful sight of Mallory Vane—dead!"

She buried her face in her hands, as if to shut out the picture she had herself conjured up.

"That is proof enough, Mr. McGee," she went on, quietly, "but if you need more, look at his actions afterward. If he were guilty would he—undemonstrative though he is—would he come calmly home—eat his dinner as usual, and the next morning, hearing of the tragedy, calmly walk around to the studio to learn the particulars?"

"Pardon me, Corinne," Guy spoke with icy politeness, "in those circumstances, that is exactly what I should do."

"I doubt it," she seemed to ponder; "well, then, Mr. McGee, here's another thing. Why are there none of Mr. Thorndike's fingerprints on the Devil's Dagger? He wore no gloves, no one does in summer, and yet no prints but mine were found on the weapon."

"I've said that I used my handkerchief to prevent that," Guy retorted, "You'll have to think up a better one than that, Corinne."

"No more is needed than the one I gave first," she said, wearily, as if nearly at the end of her endurance. "Mr. Thorndike never would have left a woman, not even knowing who she was, to come

out of her hiding place and be confronted with that crime. Would you, Guy?"

"I did," he muttered, but his words carried no conviction.

"No, you did not. No man could do a thing like that, and especially not you, the most chivalrous nature in the world. No, Mr. McGee, you'll not find anyone who will agree that Guy Thorndike could have done that. He might kill a man in a fit of rage, but knowing a woman was in the apartment, he could not go off and leave her to a certain terrible shock. Another thing, and this is a stronger argument than it sounds. Mr. Thorndike had no motive, no real motive. I had. A man is enraged at another man's insults to his wife, he knocks the other man down, he may beat or kick him, but—he does not kill him. Had he seen Mr. Vane with me, he might have—he would have killed him. But not because he spoke slightly of me. So, I had to kill him myself. I had to—there was no other way out—no other way out!"

Her hands clasped to her breast, her great eyes full of unshed tears, with no trace of pathos or melodrama, Prillilgirl shook her head sadly, and repeated, "no other way out."

McGee wondered that Thorndike made no move toward her, no motion to take her in his arms or

even clasp her hand. Did he believe her guilty? Did he know of her guilt? Was she telling the truth and the actor merely acting? It began to seem so.

And with, for the first time, a real tremble in her voice, for the first time a tear rolling down the soft cheek, she turned to Thorndike, and in piteous tones said, "Do you believe me now, Guy?"

The look he gave answered her. A look of inevitable belief, unwilling, forced, but belief. It was eloquent of assent, it held a world of scornful pity, but it showed no affection, no love.

It vanished, however, as quickly as it had appeared, and Thorndike said, in a ringing tone, "No! I do not believe you. I never shall believe you killed Vane, and I shall move Heaven and earth to prove you didn't!"

Prillilgirl looked at him proudly.

"And that's the man" she said, "you think could desert a woman in a desperate crisis!"

CHAPTER XV

SIR ANDREW BAINES

McGEE was nonplused. He had never met a situation exactly like this one and he didn't know just how to cope with it.

Of course he believed Mrs. Thorndike was guilty: of course he could understand just why and how she had killed Vane. Had it not been that the weapon was ready at hand, and such a peculiarly sharp, swift instrument of death, the deed would not have been possible—at any rate would not have been so easy of accomplishment or so readily suggested.

He had thought at first that the little roseleaf beauty was incapable of the crime, but since he had heard her talk he realized there was more of what he called spunk in her frail little make-up than he had supposed, and he surmised that, cornered, she would put up a stiff fight before she would give in.

Also, and this had weight with him, he saw that Guy Thorndike had at last come to believe in his wife's guilt. This, automatically, let Thorndike out and moreover was a pretty strong proof of the lady's story. It proved what he already had suspected, that Thorndike had "confessed" only to shield

his wife and that after she had so convincingly told her story, he saw the futility of further protestation.

It was quite evident that one of them did it. It was far more likely to be the lady, for as she had said, Thorndike would have knocked Vane down, would have pummelled him to unconsciousness, even might have killed him with his fists, but he never would have knifed him.

Moreover, Vane was seated in his chair when he was killed. That bore out the lady's story. Had Thorndike fought with him, Vane would have been on the floor.

The whole account of Vane's drawing the enticing little figure down on his knee and her struggle and then in despair snatching at the dagger was plausible and credible. Guy credited it—McGee could see that. In fact he had seen it. Thorndike's face had shown his unwilling but forced belief in his wife's story, and then, naturally he had denied all such faith.

Of course, he was bound to make such a denial, but it didn't deceive McGee. He understood the situation, if it was a strange one, and a very unpleasant one. And the poor little thing would not, of course, be punished.

It might yet be necessary to have some further

details of Vane's behavior, but the poor child should be guarded and protected in every possible way.

"I'm going off for a while," he said to Thorndike, "I've no fear Mrs. Thorndike will run away——"

He looked up inquiringly, and Thorndike assured him, "No, she will not. I'll answer for that."

"Then I'll see you again later," and McGee went off.

Of course, he took no chances on the escape of his suspect, and he had the Thorndike house watched carefully, but inconspicuously.

He went to the studio, determined to have the thing out with Jessup, who, he was sure, knew the whole truth.

That big, good-natured chap was lounging moodily about. His usual sunny face was lined and clouded with worry, and the advent of the detective in no way cheered him up.

"Well, old Trouble-finder, what are you after now?"

"The truth, Mr. Jessup," McGee said, seriously. "And from you. As you are aware, you know more of the actual details of this affair than almost anyone else, and you've got to come across."

"'Got' is strong language," said Pete, belligerently, and then he regretted his words as he saw the menace on the detective's face.

Roland Ross was there, too, for he had taken up his abode in the studio while looking over Vane's belongings—now his own.

"I say, Mr. McGee," Ross began, "I asked you to drop this whole investigation——"

"Can't be did," snapped McGee, shortly. "You know yourself Mr. Ross, what you suggest is——"

"But investigations have been hushed up and——"

"Takes a terrible lot of money to do such things," and McGee winked.

"All right," Jessup put in eagerly. "I'll see about that end of it. Can you call it off, McGee?"

"No, it's gone too far. Don't be foolish, you two. The little lady will have to stand trial, but nothing will happen to her after that. She wouldn't be convicted in a million years. Now, see here, Mr. Jessup, it's no use your looking like that. Mrs. Thorndike killed Vane, and you know it. You tried all sorts of fool stunts to divert suspicion from her, but you didn't put it over. Now, I'll tell you, as man to man, you'll only injure her case if you keep up that racket. Come off that perch, and tell frankly what you know. Likely as not it will be in the lady's favor after all. Everybody knows what sort of man Vane was, and though Mrs. Thorndike was indiscreet in coming here alone, there was no crime in that. Then when he became

—dangerous—menacing, the whole world would justify her in the course she took. What woman wouldn't have done the same thing? It was by mere chance that such a fearful way out presented itself at the moment. Now, listen—I have it from the lady's own lips that she did do it, that because of Vane's unwelcome and inescapable attentions—he drew her down on his knee as he sat at his desk, she snatched up that devilish penholder thing and drove it at him. She is of an excitable, emotional nature—moreover, she is inexperienced in the ways of wicked men. I think you get the situation.”

Jessup and Ross looked at him in silence. They did get the situation. They did see, now it was so graphically presented to them, how the thing had happened, how inevitable it was in the circumstances that it should happen.

But Pete wasn't even yet quite ready to give up.

“Look here, McGee,” he said, striving to make his words carry weight. “The circumstances as you relate them, are nearly right, but not quite. Vane did attack Mrs. Thorndike, he did make love to her, he did frighten the poor child almost to death—but it was just then that I came in, and I——”

“Now, look here, Mr. Jessup,” the detective smiled broadly at him, “if you're going to claim the honor of murdering Mallory Vane, you may

as well save your breath. Mr. Thorndike tried to make out he did it—I expect Mr. Ross will offer his confession next—and, while it's commendable, to be sure, it simply won't go down. No, Mr. Jessup, you didn't arrive at the critical moment and save the lady from distress and dishonor by stabbing the bold, bad man! But you did come in after the lady had done the deed, and you did help to get her away unobserved, and you did clean up around here afterward, and strew false clues about to point to a pleasant fiction named Manning."

"Yes, I did," said Jessup, stoutly, "and I'm sorry my plans didn't work out better. But, since they didn't, I want to do anything I can to help the Thorndikes."

"'Fess up, then. Tell the whole and the exact truth about your arrival on the scene."

Jessup looked doubtful, but McGee assured him that he could do no good by further deception.

Ross listened as Pete told the details of his homecoming the night of the crime.

"Of course," he wound up, "when I found Vane dead, and Mrs. Thorndike shut up in the telephone booth, I knew pretty well what must have happened. I had but the one thought to get her home—unseen. Then, having done the best I could about that, I did try to divert suspicion from her. I don't

care whether I was accessory after the crime, and all that or not. I'd do it again, if necessary—only, next time I'd do it better."

"Practice makes perfect," said McGee, dryly. "What did the lady say when you found her in the booth?"

"Oh, nothing definite. In fact, I didn't want her to say anything, I wouldn't let her. I had no idea she killed Vane, but I thought she knew who did do it, and the thing to do was to get her home. I called her duenna to come and get her—and I told her to say she had been shopping or at a picture gallery, or anywhere but here. You see, I acted on impulse, but I did what I thought was for the best. There you are—make the most of it."

Dan Larkin arrived then, and the whole story was gone over for his benefit.

He pondered deeply, with an anxious face.

"Oh, of course, she'll be in no danger of the chair," he said. "But I'm not so sure she'll get off scot free. Vane was an important man, and though Mrs. Thorndike is really an ignorant baby, nobody's going to know that. She's going to be censured more than you men seem to think."

"You're right, Larkin," Ross agreed. "That's why I want to call off the hunt. It seems to me that as I'm the heir——"

"I've told you before, Mr. Ross," McGee interrupted. "You can't stop the law's progress. It's got to go on, and track down the criminal, man or woman. The consequences of Mrs. Thorndike's deed may be grave or light according to the way the case is presented and the cleverness of her lawyers. But she must stand trial——"

"You haven't arrested her yet?" exclaimed Larkin.

"No, but it's only a matter of hours now. I can't see any other course to take. Her arrest is inevitable."

His three hearers shuddered. The idea of arresting that butterfly—that fairy! It was a preposterous thought!

Larkin sighed deeply. He was a coarse-grained man, he was a hard man, and he was called an unscrupulous man, but he seemed to be genuinely touched at the hint of the cruel arrest of Prillilgirl for murder!

"Look here," he said, speaking gruffly, "that little woman couldn't have killed a man—she'd not be physically capable of such a thing."

"Not with an ordinary knife," McGee told him, "but that Devil's Dagger is as sharp as a razor and as slender as a stiletto. It may well be she merely snatched it up to defend herself, not intending to kill, and in a scuffle or in mere hysteria, she drove

it into his breast not realizing its deadly power. All that will come out in the trial, and if she can prove self-defense she'll be freely acquitted. Her husband is a smart man, he ought to be clever enough to see that she gets off."

"Oh, Guy's clever enough," Larkin conceded, "but you see he did this murder himself."

"I don't think so," McGee returned unimpressed.

"But he did, I tell you. His confession was the true one. And when that poor young one took it on her shoulders, he just let her, that's all."

"You really think this, Mr. Larkin?" McGee watched him closely.

"What do you mean, Dan?" Jessup broke in, a new hope dawning on his big, good-natured face.

"I mean what I say," Larkin reiterated. "As I've told you people, I came round here about five-thirty or six—I don't know what time—and I saw Guy just entering the door. I didn't want to see old Guy just then, for I had bought that play from Vane earlier in the day, and I knew Guy'd be mighty sore about it. So I moseyed off again, and Guy came in here. Now of course, as he told the story, it's the true one. Vane hid the girl in the telephone booth—hot—stuffy place, and the poor little thing went to pieces, either because of the heat

and excitement, or because she saw Guy kill Vane. Now, don't ask questions, I don't know any more about the actual facts than you do, but I can use my bean and I believe that's the truth of the matter."

"So do I," shouted Pete. "I'll never believe that angel child did it, but I can readily understand her swearing she did, to save her husband. She worships that man like a god, and——"

"And he treats her like the dirt under his feet," supplemented Larkin. "No, McGee, you're on the wrong track. Better pull up before it's too late."

"I'll pull up when somebody advises it besides a lot of young fellows who are all in love with the lady! I'm not utterly blind if I am a detective, and I can see through your frantic efforts to save the poor child and the little angel lady, and all that. But, you see, I've heard her tell the story herself, and it's far more convincing than your biased theories. Why, even her husband had to believe her—much against his will."

"Against his will! Huh!" exclaimed Larkin. "Why, Guy wants her to take it over. He knows she'll get off, and he knows he wouldn't! See?"

"Oh, come now," and Pete looked indignant, "Old Guy wouldn't hide behind a woman's skirts——"

"Not in ordinary cases," Larkin agreed. "I

know his upstage chivalry as well as you do—but murder is a serious matter. And connivance is quite possible—I mean connivance in this decision to let the lady take the burden because then they'll both go free, and if Guy were accused, he wouldn't stand a show."

"There's something in that idea, Mr. Larkin," the detective said, thoughtfully, "but——"

"No buts about it, man. That's the way it is. Now, have a care before you arrest that lady on nothing but her own evidence."

"What do you think, Mr. Jessup?" McGee asked. "I mean judging from what you saw when you came in that night."

Pete reflected.

"It could be either way," he said at last. "I mean, if she had killed Vane or if she had seen Guy kill Vane, she would have acted, I'm sure, in the same hysterical, dazed fashion. She was simply all in, with the heat, the fright, and the horror of it all. The wonder was that she wasn't in a dead faint. Her brain was whirling, but she was perfectly conscious. No, if I were on my oath, I should have to say that I couldn't be certain whether she was the principal or merely a witness."

"But the prints on the dagger—the stains on her dress and hands—" McGee reminded him.

"Might all have come from a dazed, wondering investigation," said Larkin.

"She may have instinctively—almost unconsciously fingered the hilt of the dagger, and even attempted to pull it out in a blind idea of saving his life. She was not responsible for her deeds just then."

"Well, she certainly has plenty of defenders," Ross said, looking from one to the other. "She doesn't need me, but I range myself on her side of course. But I say, mightn't somebody else have killed Vane? I don't believe it was Thorndike—he came in here too simply and naturally afterward——"

"He's an actor," Larkin reminded him, "and one of the finest actors we have today. If he did it—and he did—he could put on all the evidences of innocence—and not overdo it, either."

"That's just what he did," McGee ruminated. "He showed all the evidence of innocence—except when he actually confessed——"

"Fake confession, to save his wife," Pete said, moodily.

"Not on your life!" Larkin cried. "It was the real thing—but he retracted. I happen to know that Vane said to Mrs. Thorndike, regarding this play of his, 'if I give it to either, the other will

kill me.' He meant if he sold his play to either Thorndike or myself. Well, he sold it to me—and—the other killed him."

"Did Vane say that?" asked McGee interestedly.

"Yes, he did," Pete corroborated. "That play was a terrible bone of contention. I've thought all along, that if Guy killed Vane it was quite as likely to be because of that play business as because of his wife. I don't think Guy knew it was his wife who was hidden there. If he had, he would have hunted her out—and he didn't do that. If he killed Vane it was in one of his sudden blind fits of rage—and he has them sometimes—at learning the play had passed to Larkin's hands."

"That gives a new twist to things," the detective admitted. "I think I shall have to see Mr. Thorndike again. But—if he killed Vane for that reason, he's not the man to let his wife bear the brunt."

"You don't see that straight," Larkin expostulated. "If she agrees, they may think that such a situation would save them both, whereas if Guy is tried, no leniency will be shown him. He's a popular actor, but he's by no means a general favorite with the community. He's too high and mighty. I doubt if a dozen men could be found who would feel kindly disposed toward him personally. Outside of half a dozen of us, who are

his regular chums, he hasn't a friend in the world—and—he has enemies."

"That's partly true," Jessup said, as the detective looked at him for a corroborating opinion.

"But I shouldn't put it so strongly. Mr. Thorndike hasn't a genial manner—he isn't a good mixer, but among his own crowd he's a favorite, all right."

"Which is just what I said," defended Larkin.

McGee went to think things over, but he delayed all idea of any arrest for another day.

Meantime the Thorndike household was in a state of perturbation.

Almost the moment McGee had departed, Agatha Barr came, and went straight to the library where Mr. and Mrs. Thorndike were sitting in silence.

"Go to your room, Corinne," said Guy as the caller entered, and his order was obeyed.

"What are you going to do, Guy?" Agatha asked, as she stood close beside him. "Did Corinne kill Vane?"

"Why—yes, Agatha—I suppose she did."

"Then—what will happen?" Her eyes shone, and she drew nearer to him as she eagerly awaited his reply. "At any rate, she won't be here any more, will she? Oh, Guy—I hate her so. With

her silly baby face and her big eyes. You don't care for her—do you, dear? ”

“No.” The actor spoke in a constrained voice, his eyes turned away from his companion. “No, Agatha, I don't—care for her.”

“You don't, you shan't care for her. You are mine—mine only!”

Her arms went round his neck, but he drew away a little impatiently.

“Oh, you can't escape me. You may not love me—you may not know you love me—but you do—you shall. There is nobody else! I never feared anyone but this worthless chit, and since you don't love her, I have you safe! Don't struggle against it, my beloved—you are mine—mine!”

She drew his face down to her own, and though he gave her a perfunctory kiss, his face showed a preoccupied frown and he shook her off a little roughly.

But Agatha showed no resentment, she was secure, she thought, in her ownership of Guy Thorn-dike, and if he didn't return her adoration, at least he adored nobody else.

She could afford to be generous.

“Poor child,” she said. “What will they do to her, Guy?”

“I don't know—Agatha, I don't know. It—

it's all too horrible to think of. Vane, and that baby! I certainly should have killed him if I had been there!"

"But you *were* there! What are you talking about?"

"I wasn't there when Vane was killed. I said I was—of course—when I tried to save Corinne—but—it didn't work. My common sense tells me there's no use keeping up that farce, so now I'm thinking the best thing to do for her. Vane! Of all men in the world!"

"Guy, look at me! Tell me the truth! Didn't you do it? Didn't you kill Mallory Vane?"

Thorndike looked deep in her eyes.

"I scorn to answer you," he said.

And knowing well the psychological moment had arrived, Agatha turned and went away, smiling to herself as she left the house.

Upstairs, a very angry Prillilgirl was sobbing in Lamb's arms.

"He fired me out!" she said, "just as I thought he was going to speak to me! He fired me out, because that Barr thing came! She's a viper—Lambie, dear, she is a viper."

"Yes, yes, my precious, she is—but never mind her. Now what are we going to do?"

"I'll tell you!" Prillilgirl gave one of her

whimsical smiles. Lamb had learned this smile. It usually meant that a bit of philosophy or a few lines of quotations would be forthcoming, which would be pertinent to the occasion, even if, as usually, rather above Lamb's devoted head.

"I suppose, Lamb, dear, you never heard of Sir Andrew Baine?"

"No, ma'am, I never did."

"Well, he came of fighting stock. We are told that when he was wounded sorely, he remarked—did Sir Andrew Baine,

'I am hurt, but I am not slaine!
I'll lay me downe and bleede a while,
And then I'll rise and fight againe!'

"That, my Lamb, is my present attitude. I'll 'bleede awhile, and then I'll rise and fight againe.' You see that viperous woman took the rise out of me—and that's not meant for a joke—but she hasn't taken the fight out of me. Lambie, dear, did I kill Mr. Vane?"

"Never! No, my precious, you never did!"

"Oh, well, I just wanted to know. I'm not sure myself. I only know now that I'm mad at that woman for spoiling the only opportunity for conversation I have ever had with that husband of mine."

The pathetic little face looked desolately at her devoted handmaid, and even as the speech ended, Guy appeared in the doorway.

"I want to speak to you, Corinne," he said, gravely.

"Yes? Come in, Guy." She spoke calmly and smiled in a cool, polite way.

He strode toward her.

"What are we going to do?" he said. "What can we do?"

"I don't know," she said, simply, looking at him with a new fear dawning in her eyes. Her uncanny intuition had already apprised her of danger, a new danger. She knew not what, but she felt its imminence.

"I have made you a great deal of trouble," she said, softly. "When you married me, I promised not to make you any trouble—didn't I? And here I've gone and made you about as bad a trouble as is possible in the whole world."

"Yes, it is a pretty bad trouble—"

"But I will fight it! If you will let me, Guy, I will——"

"Hush, Prillilgirl—you can't fight——"

"Indeed I can! I am not the baby you take me for! You don't know me, Guy. You have never spoken to me since you married me—except the

inevitable commonplaces before company—we have never before spoken alone together. Now let me tell you that, as you married me——”

“Hush! I never married you. That ceremony was not a real one. He was not a real minister——”

But Prillilgirl lay in a crumpled heap on the floor, and Thorndike was roughly pushed aside as Lamb ran to the rescue of her darling.

CHAPTER XVI

THE TRUTH

WHEN Prillilgirl opened her eyes she was lying on her bed and Lamb was hovering about with a glass and a spoon.

"There, now, dearie, there now—just take this, and then try to sleep."

"Sleep! Lamb, I believe you'd like me to sleep my life away! Sleep! Macbeth hath murdered sleep! Oh, no—I haven't taken leave of my senses, don't look like that! In fact, I've just come to my senses, I think. Lamb, you've known all along—haven't you?—that I was not Guy Thorndike's wife?"

"Yes, ma'am, I have. And sorely I've worried about it——"

"But you should have told me——"

"Oh, ma'am, I dared not. Mr. Thorndike laid it upon us—me and Webb—never to let you know——"

"I see. I begin to see. And that explains why Mr. Thorndike never even spoke to me——"

Prillilgirl was pacing the floor, with slow, halting steps. Her gold curls tumbled about her face and her blue chiffon negligee trailed behind her.

Suddenly she paused, drew herself up proudly and said, "Dress me, Lamb. Give me a black frock—the Malines—and do my hair firmly."

Wondering, Lamb obeyed. The wonder was caused by the unusual attitude of her mistress. The baby face had acquired a mature expression, the stormy eyes had become serene, but watchful. The nervous, fluttering hands were quiet, and the scarlet mouth was no longer quivering but was set determinedly.

The black Malines was a bewildering mass of tiny frills that fell away from the soft white neck and arms as the petals of a flower.

But there was no hint of vanity or coquetry in the face that looked in the mirror for a final inspection.

It was the face of a woman about to take into her own hands the adjustment of her life's conditions and do the best she could with them.

She went down stairs and to the library.

It was the first time she had ever gone there unsummoned, but she went in without hesitation.

Thorndike sat, smoking.

He rose as she entered and without a word placed a chair for her.

She sat down and he continued to stand, leaning against the mantel in a pose unconsciously dramatic.

"Sit down," she said, quietly. "You look as if you were on the stage."

He sat down, still silent, and Prillilgirl began.

"I have to thank you for your great kindness in saving me from all sorts of unknown dangers that day I came to you here."

Thorndike bowed gravely but said no word.

"I didn't know then—but I know now—well, never mind all that. You don't want my gratitude or appreciation. But I want you to know that I understand, that I see now what a wonderful, what a chivalrous thing it was that you did. It was the only thing to do, but no one else would have thought of it."

"I'm glad you see it that way, Corinne. It was the only thing to do. To marry you really, would have been an injustice to you as well as to myself. To do what I did do ensured your safety and, I hoped, happiness. I knew Lamb would be the perfect duenna and guardian of you and that I need have no fear so long as she was at the helm. Nor had I—until, I will be frank, until I overheard Jessup making love to you. Oh, don't think I'm an eavesdropper. I came to your door to speak to you, and I couldn't help catching a few words of his rather interesting instructions as to the ways of love——"

Thorndike smiled a little and Prillilgirl flushed at the recollection.

"But, Guy," she began and then stopped.

"Well —" he prompted.

"I am here to have a serious talk," she resumed, and her air and manner were so cool and self-possessed that he stared at her in amazement.

Where was the baby-faced chit that had been around his house of late? Where was the ignorant, silly, irresponsible little fool he had pretended to marry? This young woman was not only mistress of herself but of the situation.

"As I am not your wife, I have no right here," she said, "and yet, conditions are really no different today from yesterday or the day before. So I shall stay here for a time—just exactly as usual—at least until this murder business is cleared up. Did you kill Mr. Vane, Guy?"

"Did you?"

"Answer me, first."

"No, Prillilgirl, I did not kill Vane."

"And you said you did to save me?"

Thorndike bowed silently.

"Yet I am not your wife."

"No, Madame."

It was that old sarcastic tone that she hated, but she made no sign.

"Then you did it out of your innate and ineradicable chivalry toward all women. You are a strange man, Guy."

She seemed to be speaking more to herself than to him.

"You haven't answered my question yet," he reminded her, making his first voluntary contribution to their conversation.

"No." She smoothed down the little black frills over her knees. "You see, I can't answer it—I don't know."

"Explain, please."

"Well, you see I was unconscious in that awful booth place for a long time. I can't say that I didn't come out and stab that man——"

"And go back again?"

"Oh, I went back again, — I remember going back——"

"Be careful what you're saying now. Tell me the exact truth."

He leaned forward looking at her earnestly.

"Yes, of course, I mean to. But that is the truth—that I don't know. You see, I was there, and you came to the door, and demanded to be let in. Mr. Vane said I must hide—and Lord knows I wanted to! So he pushed me into the telephone booth and shut the door. I couldn't hear at all, the thing

is soundproof, they say. And I couldn't see, except dimly, through that crackle glass, and even then, only when you men came in the line of vision. You know how that booth faces the end wall, and you can't see the whole studio."

"I know."

"So—I could only see shadows—but it looked as if you were fighting. Were you?"

"No."

"Well, I couldn't tell. Anyway, it was furiously hot, and I didn't dare open the door even a mite, for you might have seen me, so I just naturally fainted. It was more than a faint, it was really a heat stroke. Of course, a heat stroke affects the brain almost like a stroke of paralysis. So that's why I say I don't know what I did. Much later, I came to myself—I was nearly suffocated—and I opened the door and looked out. There was Mr. Vane in his chair and that Devil's Dagger sticking out of his breast. Involuntarily, I went to him and I fingered the dagger, wondering whether I ought to draw it out or not. And—here is the truth, Guy, it seemed to me then, that as I had thrust it in, I ought to pull it out."

"Then, I heard someone coming, and in a sort of panic I rushed back into the booth again. Somehow that seemed a sort of haven——"

"You poor little thing!" burst from Thorndike, but she paid no heed.

"And it was Pete who came in, Pete Jessup. I could hear him stepping about for I hadn't quite closed the door. And then after a time—it seemed an hour—he came to the booth, to telephone, you know, and he found me."

"Fortunate it was someone who—cared for you."

"Yes, wasn't it? Now, Guy, did I kill Mallory Vane?"

"No! Never, in a thousand years!"

"You say that out of—out of principle. I believe I did. He had been horrid to me—and I think that remembrance was still in my—what do you call it—sub-consciousness, and while I was out of my head with that heat stroke, I believe I went out and stabbed him and went back again——"

"Nonsense, child, what was Vane doing? Sitting there waiting to be stabbed?"

"No, he was writing, I think."

"Wait a minute—then that yarn you told about his drawing you down on his knee, and your using the dagger in self defense—that was pure fiction?"

"N—no." She looked puzzled. "No, Guy, that was true, but that happened before you came in—I think—or after you left. I don't know. But here's the way it seems. It seems as if that happened

and then I went out and stabbed him because I didn't do it before. There, that sounds garbled, I know, but it's as I remember it. Anyway—I thought a little bit you did it, and then I tried to take it on me to help you out—but—I guess it belongs on me any way. You're innocent—and there's nobody else to suspect."

"Pete."

"Never! He——"

"Now, hold on, don't shoulder that crime again to save Pete Jessup! You're a strange little piece, Corinne, but I can't have you sacrificed for a whimsey. Of course you didn't kill Vane, either in your conscious moments or while unconscious——"

"Then who did?"

"I don't know—but we've got to find out. If you did it unconsciously, it can never be proved. And I know, I am certain, you didn't do it consciously——"

"Oh, I'm certain of that myself. But who did do it?"

"Why are you so sure Jessup didn't? He came in after I left and while you were still there. Nobody else did that."

"No, of course not. But if you had seen Pete, you would know he couldn't have done it. He was

so cut up about Mallory, and yet, when he found me, he thought only of how to get me home without being seen. Clever of him to call Lamb, wasn't it?"

"Only thing he could do, Corinne. Circumstantial evidence certainly points to Jessup. I'm fond of the chap, but if he did it, it must come out for your sake. You've got to be completely exonerated."

"But if I did it, Guy——"

"You didn't do it. Out of your mind or in your mind, you didn't do it."

"Your saying that doesn't make it so." She gave a little sigh.

"No, and your being in love with Pete Jessup doesn't make him innocent!"

"No." She raised calm eyes to his sneering face. "No, it doesn't. Are you going to accuse him?"

"I'm going to have the matter looked into. If he's innocent, surely investigation can do him no harm. And if he's guilty, I want to know it."

"Well I don't! It's disgraceful to hound down an innocent man and such a fine man as Pete Jessup. You know how often some trivial circumstance makes a man appear guilty when he isn't at all. Now, Guy, don't do it. Pete is your friend—my friend—don't put his life in danger through a silly and futile curiosity——"

"Corinne! You must be out of your mind again!"

"I am permanently out of my mind—as you have heretofore known my mind. I am a different person since—since—"

"Since you learned of my treachery to you?"

"I don't look on it as treachery." The lovely face was sincere and sweet. "You did the wisest and best thing. You couldn't really marry me, of course—I know that now——"

"And don't you remember, you said, 'I don't mean a real marriage—I just want to have a ring and be called Mrs. Guy Thorndike.' Don't you remember, Sweet o' the Year?"

"Yes, I remember. And you did just that. You gave me a ring and the name. And I am grateful. What shall I do in the future——"

"Why not just let it all go on as it has been?"

"No, I can't—now that I know." But it must go on until the Vane matter is finished one way or another—one way or another. "

"Corinne," he spoke suddenly and harshly, "do you know anything about it that you haven't told me?"

"N—no," she began, a little hesitatingly, when Webb appeared and announced the arrival of Jessup and Roland Ross.

"Go to your room, Corinne," Thorndike said. But with a calm glance at him of decision, not defiance, she sat still.

The men came in, not at all surprised to find the two Thorndikes in confab, and Ross, especially was glad to see them both.

"I say, Mrs. Thorndike," he began. "I want to tell you how awful sorry I am that I stirred up trouble over this investigation. If I hadn't raised a rumpus because the police were not nailing my cousin's slayer, perhaps the whole matter would have been dropped and you'd been saved a lot of trouble."

"No, Mr. Ross," Thorndike returned to this, "they would have gone on any way. That energetic McGee says he's like a puppy at a root, and he is. He'll never let go until he pulls up the root or breaks his neck pulling."

"That's so, Guy," and Jessup nodded. "Now what Roly wants, and I do too, is to fake up some imaginary burglar or intruder who did the killing, and put it over on McGee. Oh, yes, I know I tried to do it—Mr. Manning was all right as far as he went, but he didn't go far enough. You see I'm too inexperienced in deception to do a thing like that properly. But if you'd help us out now—you or Larkin. I can't think of anyone else with enough diabolical

ingenuity, but either or both of you could fake up a suspect that would do for McGee."

"What a marvelous idea!" And Guy looked at Jessup with an undisguised smile of tolerant amusement.

"Look here, Pete," said Prillilgirl, suddenly, "did you kill Mallory?"

"No, my child," and Pete smiled benignly. "I had no wish to kill old Mal, and besides, I hadn't time. Why, when I arrived on the scene, I at once became the busiest little fixer-up of matters and things you ever saw."

"Don't laugh, Pete," and the big brown eyes were full of reproach. "Guy knows all about your finding me there—I told him—and he—we both want to know for sure, that you're innocent."

"Yes, for sure, I'm innocent," and the most suspicious or doubting inquisitor must have believed the frank assurance of Pete's earnest, blue eyes. "Oh, bosh, what nonsense are you talking!" he exclaimed. "Not only am I innocent but I believe both of you Thorndikes are too. Friend Ross, here, is not so certain—if you can convince him, better do so."

"Don't have to," Thorndike said, carelessly. "If he suspects me, the burden of proof rests on him."

"Oh, Lord, Mr. Thorndike, I don't suspect

you," Ross said, quickly. "All I want is to get my inheritance matters settled up and get out of this burg. I hate New York, just want to get away."

"Mr. Ross really means that he suspects me," came Prillilgirl's soft voice. "But I don't think I did it. My husband says I didn't."

"Hush, Corinne, don't talk like that," Guy said. "Pete, your notion of a fake murderer is too ridiculous to consider."

"Not at all. It's a grand scheme. Pull the wool over McGee's eyes, and he goes off on a wild goose chase and never comes back! See? Perfect!"

"Don't be a fool, Pete." Guy spoke angrily, for he detested any jocular attitude toward such serious matters.

"Well, I shall pull out as soon as I can," said Ross. "I had planned to wait till the detectives had accomplished something, but they're so stupid and slow, I'm going to give it up and dig for home. I've had enough of the city in summer—it doesn't agree with me."

"I don't mind it myself," Guy said. "But it isn't good for Mrs. Thorndike. I want to get her off to the country as soon as possible. I'm expecting McGee's report today, and if he's willing, I shall send her away at once."

"Where to?" asked Jessup, rather eagerly.

"Not beyond your reach," Guy said, with an unpleasant laugh. "You shall have her address."

"Thank you," Pete said, quietly, though his blood boiled at the tone. He did not look at Prillil-girl, who sat calm and collected, her white hands lying quietly on the ruffles of her black frock.

Soon after that Jessup took his leave. He couldn't stand Guy's attitude which seemed to recognize Pete's admiration of his wife and be rather amused by it.

But Ross stayed and was present when McGee finally arrived.

The detective was a bit cast down. He had been in conference with his superiors and had been somewhat reprimanded for not having produced a probable criminal in the Vane case. They would not believe in the guilt of Mrs. Thorndike without more evidence and this McGee could see no way to get.

"And you can't get it," was Guy's comment on this, "because there isn't any to get. My wife didn't kill Mr. Vane, and I didn't either. Mr. Jessup says he didn't, and I, for one, believe him. Now somebody killed that man—he didn't kill himself."

"Why didn't he?" cried Ross. "By Jove, there's an idea! Why not a suicide? It would settle matters up good and quick!"

"You and Pete cook up the most idiotic plans!" Thorndike said, scowling at Ross's enthusiasm.

"You ought to be glad of it, Mr. Thorndike," McGee said, with a knowing look.

"Meaning that otherwise my wife or myself will be suspected further?"

"Well, yes, meaning just about that."

"Then, listen, Mr. McGee, and, you too, Mr. Ross. You both know as well as I do, that Mallory Vane never committed suicide—never. As I said, somebody killed him. I'm going to find out who. No, I don't propose to do any detective work myself, I don't know how. But I'm going to get somebody who does know how. And, understand, McGee, this is no reflection on you or your work. You have done well. You have worked hard and faithfully and with a good degree of efficiency. But you haven't hit upon the right tack, somehow. And I know you are willing to admit there are others in your profession who by reason of talent or experience or both stand above you. So, I'm going to employ one of these to solve the mystery of Vane's death and ferret out the slayer. I'm not afraid that this procedure will prove a boomerang and return on the head of my wife or me. If it does—at least the case will be cleared up."

"Stone, I suppose," said McGee, laconically.

"Who's Stone?" Thorndike asked.

"Fleming Stone. He's the biggest private detective in the country," McGee returned. "Not spectacular or Sherlock Holmesy, but a straight-goods detective, who takes a case, works on it and solves it in a practical, commonsense way—the way I'd like to work, but I haven't his quick, clear brains."

"Sounds good to me," Guy said. "Where is this man?"

"I'll get him for you, or you can get him yourself. But he only takes cases that interest him——"

"They all say that," said Thorndike carelessly. "But this one will interest him."

"You bet it will," Ross agreed. "But are you sure, Mr. Thorndike, you want this wizard wizzing around? S'pose he pins it on your wife?"

"Then it will be pinned," said Prillilgirl, smiling faintly. "And if I did do it, I want to know it."

"You see," Guy explained as McGee looked inquiring, "Mrs. Thorndike thinks she may have committed that crime in her moments of unconsciousness. I am so sure she did not, that I am willing, even anxious to have a really clever man on this job. Forgive me, McGee—I don't want to hurt your feelings—but you had your chance, you know."

"Yes, Mr. Thorndike, I did. And I'm not laying down on the job. I know Mr. Stone; he'll let me work with him, and I may be of use to him. But he'll see ways to look and clues to follow that I never dreamed of. You'll see! He's not what they call transcendental, but he's a mighty fine detective."

"Then I wish you'd engage him for me, if you can get him, McGee. I suppose you can get your department to suspend their activities for a day or two—"

"Activities!" breathed Ross, and McGee flushed scarlet.

"Let up, Ross," Guy adjured him. "McGee has done well and if Stone can do better——"

"Nobody will be more glad than I," McGee said, heartily. "All right, Mr. Thorndike, I'll do my best to get Stone and I'll let you know as soon as I know myself."

Both men went away and the two Thorndikes were left alone together.

Prillilgirl sat quietly a moment, as if lost in thought. Then she rose.

"I suppose, Guy, I shall stay here, then, until Mr. Stone's investigations are over."

"Of course; where would you stay?"

"There are plenty of places I might stay," she

spoke quietly and with no emphasis. "But I think when I go, Lamb will go with me. Indeed, I doubt if I could make her stay behind. I'm sorry to deprive you of your housekeeper——"

"Look here, why do you talk about leaving here?"

She favored him with a long, straightforward gaze.

"I can't very well remain under your roof now I know that I am not your wife. And I suppose everybody will know it soon—if, indeed, they don't know it now. Guy, does Agatha know it?"

"No, she does not. Nobody knows it except Lamb and Webb. And of course, the chap who played the parson. Corinne, I'm not exactly apologizing, but I am explaining that I did that from the best of motives—merely your own protection. I couldn't marry you—it was too absurd. So I did what seemed to me, on the impulse of the moment, the next best thing. As you yourself hinted, it protected me from women who wanted to marry me—seekers, I believe you called them."

Both smiled faintly.

"I quite understand, Guy. You did exactly right. I wish I might have lived on in my Fool's Paradise, but—since it was a make-believe, it's as

well I know the truth, and I can arrange my life accordingly. ”

“What do you propose to do? ”

“I haven’t decided yet. ” She spoke as lightly as if it were some trivial matter under discussion.

“But I shan’t have to decide now, until after the new detective comes. By the time his work is done, I shall have my own plans made. ”

“Which will include, I suppose, a matrimonial alliance——”

“Perhaps. ”

“With Pete Jessup. ”

“Perhaps. ”

CHAPTER XVII

STRANGE DOINGS

LAMB scarcely knew her new mistress. From a soft, pliable, kitten-like nature had developed a strong, self-willed, self-reliant character.

"You see, Lambie, I have to look out for myself now!" was the only explanation vouchsafed. And so capably was the looking-out carried on that Lamb merely stared in admiration.

For Prillilgirl did strange things.

One was to send for Dan Larkin and accord him a private interview.

"Mr. Larkin," his charming hostess said, "I want that play of Mr. Vane's for my husband."

"Yes," said the astute visitor, very suavely. He knew his own rôle.

"You see," Prillilgirl went on, watching him warily, "I was writing a play myself with Mr. Vane for Mr. Thorndike—but, now that plan is impossible, so I hope you will agree to let him have the play you bought from Mr. Vane. Of course, he will pay you what you paid for it."

"Of course. But, Mrs. Thorndike, as you know, I want that play myself. Now, if you expect me to

hand it over to Guy, what—er—bonus, what inducement do you offer? ”

“ Bonus? Inducement? ” She looked utterly blank. I don’t understand.”

“ You will in a minute. I will give you that play for your husband on one condition and one only. That is, that you become my wife.”

“ But—but I am married already.”

Dan Larkin was not a handsome man. His bald egg-shaped head was set on a short, thick neck, and his eyes were of the type commonly called pop-eyed.

His lips were thick and red, and his whole expression was a combination of greed and cunning, mingled now with a strong hint of amorous desire.

His lack of manly beauty was made even more apparent by the silent reply he made to her statement, which consisted of a slow, and very knowing wink.

That wink froze the blood of Prillilgirl. It seemed to her to hold the quintessence of all that was dreadful and fearsome. It seemed to strike a knell of doom all the more terrifying that she didn’t quite know where it was leading her.

But she held out bravely.

“ Yes, and so I can’t marry you, of course—”

“ Here, stop that nonsense.” Larkin meant to be playful, but his voice was gruff. “ You know as well as I do, that you’re not married to Guy Thorndike.”

So the secret was no secret! She knew Guy had told her the truth when he said it was not generally known, but she realized that somehow it had leaked out—doubtless through the man who had personated a minister—anyway, there was no use in her further pretense. Since Larkin knew, everybody else did or soon would.

She looked at him in a panic of fear. She must get that play for Guy, somehow. It was the only thing in the world she could do for him. The only way she could make up, in some slight degree, for the trouble she had caused him.

And then the ludicrous side of it struck her. The thought of her—the dainty butterfly that she knew she was—married to that hulk of flesh, that leering ogre opposite her!

She burst into a fit of laughter, partly hysterical and partly at the ridiculous idea.

But Larkin was alarmed. He thought she was going to have hysterics, and he sprang toward her in an honest endeavor to be of help.

But one touch on her soft arm so stirred him, that he flung his arms round her, pulled her from her chair, and lifting her lovely face, kissed her avidly—brutally.

Quivering with rage, but forcing herself to be

calm, Prillilgirl, with a gesture of contempt freed herself from his arms.

"At least, I am not married to you yet," she said, in a tone of intense relief.

She pulled her ruffles straight, seeming no more perturbed by his violent and unwelcome embrace than if he had merely patted her shoulder.

"But you will be! Oh, you beauty! I'm mad about you—mad!"

"I don't care for madness, I prefer some more convincing proof of a man's love."

"You shall have any proof you want—any proof you care for——"

"Who killed Mallory Vane?"

"You did."

She was so taken aback at this that she stood staring at him.

"I! And you want to marry me!"

"You bet I do! What do I care if you've killed a dozen men! I want you—you—you, you angel—you Queen of Heaven——"

"Hush your nonsense, and besides, I didn't kill him—at least, I don't think I did."

"Then Guy did. It was one of you. But I don't care which one. In either case I can shut off the investigation if I want to. I daresay you don't know how powerful I am when it comes to manipulating

such things. If I so will it, there'll be no further inquiry into Mallory Vane's death, and so, whether Guy or you drove that blade, nobody will ever know it. How about it, little one? Marry me and save your husband from the electric chair—or yourself," he smiled, "and, incidentally get that play you're so crazy about—or, refuse me, and let the law take its course, and convict one or both of you—whether rightfully, or not. Oh, yes, I can make innocent people appear guilty as well as *vice versa*. Up to you, my beauty."

Not only the words but the tones of Larkin carried conviction that he spoke the truth. It was well known that he was a power in the political world and it was his boast that he could bend anything or anybody to his own ends.

But Prillilgirl was not intimidated.

She had only one great desire in the world at present. That was to get the Vane play for Guy, and then she was going out of his life forever. She didn't care whether Guy had killed Vane or not, she didn't care whether she had done it herself or not—sometimes she thought she had, in her strange unconsciousness—she cared only for Guy to have that play. And for her to be the means of getting it for him.

She must do that—and this might be her last chance. If she definitely refused Larkin's offer now,

he might never make it again. Yet her intuition told her he would. Surely that eager, ardent man would not give up after only one trial. She looked at him again, appraising his physical effects.

She could think of no worse calamity than to be his wife—yet, if it would gain for Guy his heart's desire, she would consent to be boiled in oil.

Still, boiling in oil would be a far easier fate than marrying Dan Larkin, and it would be over sooner.

These thoughts raced through her subconscious mind while she tried to decide what to say at the moment.

She couldn't decide. There was one persistent little thought at the back of her mind that prevented any decision. That thought must be reckoned with first.

"Mr. Larkin," she said, and Dan eyed her keenly, "will you give me twenty-four hours to make my decision? That isn't an unusual request. Big matters require thought and consideration—and," smiling bravely, "this is a big matter."

"It's all of that. Yes—I will give you time, but let me also give you a warning. Don't try to put anything over on me, for you can't do it."

Instantly Prillilgirl became dignified.

"Don't use such terms to me. I do not understand them. What do you mean?"

"I beg your pardon. I mean don't double-cross me—oh, that isn't much better, is it? Well, here then. Don't think that by a day's delay you can do anything—anything at all to help your cause, or Thorndike's. For you can't do it. I am all powerful in the matters we are discussing. I can make or break Guy Thorndike as an actor, a manager or a man. Now, do you understand that?"

"I understand—but I don't believe it." And the scarlet lip curled scornfully.

Larkin gave a short, ugly laugh.

"It doesn't matter to me whether you believe it or not—it's perfectly true."

And the calm tone of this speech carried a cold chill to the heart of the listener.

But she laughed lightly, and said, "All right, then, Mr. Larkin, I'll give you an answer tomorrow—and you must wait patiently till then."

"I'll wait—but not patiently," and in consequence of a very definite and indicative gesture of farewell, he bowed himself out.

The next morning Prillilgirl reported this interview to Thorndike.

He was more angry than she had ever before seen him.

"You marry that brute!" he exclaimed. "Never!"

"But I'm not married to you, am I, Guy?"

"No—I've told you you're not."

"Yes, I know it. And Guy—you don't love me, do you?"

"No."

"And you never will?"

"No."

"Then I don't see any reason why I shouldn't marry Mr. Larkin."

"Do you love him?"

"No."

"Will you ever love him?"

"No."

"Then why do you marry him?"

"In order to get that play for you that you want so much."

"Oh, rot! Do you suppose I want the play at such a price?"

"But what can I do? I must live somewhere—"

"Go and live with Lamb—wherever you like—I'll look after your finances."

"I couldn't do that," she sighed. "I could take your money when I thought I was your wife—but not now."

"Then you're marrying Larkin for a home—not for my benefit. Better take Jessup."

"That wouldn't get the play for you," she returned, simply. "I guess I'll work this out for myself, Guy. You've no sort of authority over me now, you see."

"Apparently not." He looked at her curiously. He couldn't quite understand this new, calm dignity that seemed to clothe the little figure as a garment.

Yet he admired it. Always liking a show of spirit in a woman, it seemed to him that this grown-up Prillilgirl was far more attractive than the baby nature she had hitherto shown.

"I have no real authority over you, he conceded, after a moment's thought, "unless the conditions of our life together, anomalous as they are, give me a sort of right to protect you—"

"I can't see how. Your protection has been a fraud, your marrying me was a pretense, the conditions of our life here are impossible. I do appreciate the kindness of your motive in taking me in here and giving me your name and—and your money, but I can't accept either any longer, now that I know I have no right to them. But, if I can get for you the one thing in the world you want—that play of Mr. Vane's—I'm going to do it. As to the price I pay, that's my own affair."

The little head was held high and the pink cheeks took on a deeper flush as the resolve was made to return favor for favor.

Thorndike looked at her gravely.

"Listen, Corinne," he said. "The detective, Stone is coming today. Don't do anything rash until

after he looks into this case. He may find something we have none of us dreamed of. I know little about him, but I can't help feeling something will break."

"Break?"

"Transpire, happen, occur, come to light, dawn upon us. Am I clear?"

"Oh, yes," and a dimpled smile rewarded his efforts to make her understand.

But he paid no attention and made no response to her murmured words as she left his presence.

That afternoon Fleming Stone arrived. The well-known detective was decidedly interested in the case, of which he had already heard, and after a session with Thorndike, he declared himself convinced that he, at least, was innocent.

"Do you think my wife could have killed Vane while she was unconscious?"

"I scarcely think so, but I would like an interview with your wife—alone."

So Prillilgirl was sent for, and met the great detective alone in the library.

Stone had sufficient control over himself not to show the surprise he felt at the sight of her. He had assumed that the actor's wife would be a theatrical type, though he knew she was not an actress.

But this lovely child, despite her efforts to be

dignified, seemed to him so appealingly young and innocent, he scarcely knew how to treat her.

"Suppose you tell me about yourself, Mrs. Thorndike," he suggested. "I mean your doings on the day Mr. Vane died—all day that day."

His pleasant voice and sympathetic smile put Prillilgirl quite at her ease, and for the first time since the tragedy she was able to give a straightforward account.

He heard her through, almost without a word, and then, as she finished he recapitulated a little.

"You're sure it was your husband who came in?" he asked.

"Oh, yes. I heard his voice outside the door, and I recognized his step."

"You didn't see him?"

"Not exactly, but I saw his shadow. And, too, I couldn't be mistaken in his voice or his step. I couldn't."

"No, of course not. I suppose you don't know the time any closer than any of the others. Nobody has a definite idea of the time."

"Does it matter so much? No, I don't know exactly. But I know it was not far from half past five."

"How do you know that?"

"Only because I meant to leave promptly at six, and I kept looking at my wrist watch because I

wanted to get along with the work—with the collaboration Mr. Vane and I were planning.”

Stone looked at her.

“Mrs. Thorndike,” he said, “did you really think you could write a play that your husband could use? You, with no experience whatever of that sort!”

“I thought I could, with Mr. Vane’s help. He was most experienced, of course, and I had——”

“Yes, what did you have to contribute to the collaboration?”

She bridled a little. “I had some original ideas that were clever, Mr. Vane said, and had a great knowledge of Mr. Thorndike’s mannerisms and traits that would naturally be helpful in writing a play specially for him.”

“And it didn’t occur to you that Mr. Vane was encouraging you and calling your ideas clever and all that, merely because he wanted to—make love to you?”

“That didn’t occur to me until it was too late,” she answered bravely, not pretending ignorance of his meaning.

“Have you gone through life without learning that men are attracted by a pretty face like yours and say things they do not mean in order to gain your favor?”

“I have had one or two experiences, Mr. Stone,

to make me know that. But I did not think Mr. Vane was that sort. I thought he was devoted to his art—to his play writing, you know, and I thought that as he was sorry not to give Guy the play he had finished, he was glad to do another for him and glad of my help. You see, he told me that he had decided to sell that play to a Mr. Mortimer. But it seems he had already sold it to Mr. Larkin. That seems to prove Mr. Vane was not a very honorable man, doesn't it?"

"I'm afraid it does. Now, you didn't see Mr. Larkin come in that afternoon?"

"Oh, no, he had been and gone before I arrived."

"And that's when Vane sold the play to Larkin?"

"Yes. And then he told me he meant to let Mr. Mortimer have it. I don't see why he did that."

"Nor I. Did he tell you, Mrs. Thorndike, as if it were true, or can you look back and think he meant to deceive you?"

"Oh, it sounded true, Mr. Stone. He was vexed, he said, at the two men, Mr. Larkin and my husband both wanting the play, and he said, 'If I let either of them have it, the other will kill me. I'm going to give it to Mortimer.' And the way he

said it was casual, as if he were just thinking aloud."

"Yet he had already sold it to Larkin and had received a large initial payment. Where is the play now?"

"Oh, Mr. Larkin has it, of course. He bought it, all right. Mr. Vane must have forgotten that when he talked about Mr. Mortimer—or else he said it to deceive me—but I can't see any sense in that? Can you?"

"Not yet. But your story is helpful so far. Now, come back to the time you were in the booth. You saw your husband's shadow?"

"Yes, and Mr. Vane's. They seemed to be having an argument but not fighting. I could only see them a moment or two. I saw Guy light a cigarette, and then he stepped out of range, and I only saw a few confused shadows after that. Then, you see, it was so boiling hot in that booth, with the door shut, and I was so bothered and worried, and the air grew so close, that I just—well I just went to sleep—but it wasn't a real sleep, it was just slipping into a sort of unconsciousness and I didn't know anything more—"

"Until when?"

She looked at him.

"That's what I haven't told anybody yet." Her face showed a troubled frown. "You see, it was all so queer, I don't know myself what it means."

"Tell me about it."

"I'm afraid—I'm afraid," she whispered, "it may incriminate my husband and he's innocent."

"Of course he is," agreed Stone, heartily. "So go ahead and tell it exactly as it happened."

"Well, when I came to myself, I was in a heap on the floor and terribly cramped."

"Terribly cramped?"

"Yes—why, is that important?"

"Only that it indicates you had been on the floor some time."

"Yes, my dress was rumpled and soiled. The floor wasn't so very clean."

"Well, go on. And then——"

"Then I listened and as I heard no sound at all, I concluded that my husband had gone home, and I thought Mr. Vane must have gone out also. It seems queer, but I thought maybe he had to go out with Guy in order to get him out. That seemed plausible, and after a few moments I opened the door a crack. I didn't hear a sound, so I got up from the floor and stepped out. I saw Mr. Vane—and I was so frightened I went right up to him. On impulse I took hold of that dagger thing and tried

to draw it out, but I couldn't. I suppose my fingering it then left the prints—yet, I don't know, Mr. Stone. Maybe I had been out there and stabbed him myself—and didn't know it."

"No—no, my child, you didn't do that. Go on with your story and tell the exact and careful truth."

"Yes. Well, then, I had a sudden panic. I seemed to realize at once that Guy had killed him—I didn't think of my doing it then, and I didn't know what to do. I couldn't stay there with that—that awful—well, anyway, I flew back into the booth and sat there wondering what to do. I suppose I fingered the telephone book then, and I suppose I had got my fingers stained red from—from Mr. Vane—but I didn't try to telephone—I had no wish to do that. I was just trying to pull myself together and think what I could do. But I couldn't think. My brain wouldn't work at all. And then, Mr. Jessup came and found me. And he sort of took charge, and managed to get me home safely. And that's all."

"And you've never told this before?"

"No, because it makes it seem as if either Guy or I must have killed Mr. Vane. And I'm sure it wasn't Guy, but I'm not sure it wasn't me—when I didn't know what I was doing, because of that heat stroke."

"And you made up a yarn about your killing Vane?"

"Yes, to divert suspicion from my husband. Are you sure he won't be thought guilty yet, Mr. Stone?"

"I'm sure of that, Mrs. Thorndike."

"And can you find out who killed Mr. Vane?"

"I hope so—I think so. You have already put several clues into my hands."

"I have? How?"

"By your true and straightforward story. You are my most valuable witness and I trust I shall soon solve the whole mystery."

"You are too wonderful! Now, here's another thing, Mr. Stone. If you can solve mysteries, you can perform miracles. So, can't you get that play back from Mr. Larkin and let Mr. Thorndike have it?"

"What play?"

Prillilgirl explained, and so deeply did she get involved in the explanation that she found herself obliged to confess her make-believe marriage.

Fleming Stone was roused to ire against Thorndike but she said, with a sad little smile, "Don't chide him, Mr. Stone. He did what he did out of his innate chivalry to women. I was nothing to him, less than nothing, but he took me in here and

gave me his name and protection to the farthest extent he could do so. But now I've found it out—and other people know it, so, I can't stay on, of course. And I've an opportunity to get that play from Mr. Larkin. If I marry him, he'll give me the play for Guy. So, I suppose I shall have to consent, for that play I must get. Don't you see it's the only possible return I can make Mr. Thorn-dike for his kindness to me."

"Kindness to you!" Fleming Stone said, ironically.

"Yes, indeed," she replied, stoutly. "And a kindness that must and shall be repaid."

CHAPTER XVIII

GUY'S DECISION

Fleming Stone took two days for his investigations and inquiries, and he made public no deductions he had made or inferences he had drawn from what he had learned.

He staid at the Thorndike house, and he had the freedom of the place. He summoned to him there those he wished to talk to, and though, as the hours dragged by, Guy longed for some results, none was forthcoming.

The first part of the time Stone looked puzzled. The latter part of the time he looked triumphant, as if his theories were being proved.

He talked much with Prillilgirl and the two became fast friends. She blossomed out like a rose in the presence of one who understood her and who appreciated the fact that she was not a child but a wise woman.

Larkin had been put off for another twenty-four hours and when he grumbled he was told that an immediate answer would, perforce, be a negative one, so he waited.

Thorndike tried to appear indifferent, but he

was perturbed and therefore irritable. The whole atmosphere of the house was like that of a smouldering volcano, and an eruption seemed, at the end of the second day, imminent.

That evening Larkin visited Guy and made him what he called a sporting proposition.

"It's this way, old man," Larkin said. "That little girl of yours committed that murder, and I saw her do it. I was around there you know, and I saw you come out, about six o'clock, or whatever it was, and I slipped in. I wanted to see Vane again about the play. Well, when I got up there, I opened the door softly, and there was the little lady just plunging that sharp devilish blade into Vane's heart. I think she was unconscious of what she was doing. I think, rather, it was a sub-conscious action, for the man had tormented her. I watched her, and I saw her go back into the booth. I was about to go to her when I heard old Jessup's whistle as he came up in the elevator. So I slipped out into the hall and down the stairs for I knew if any question came up I'd be suspected of doing for Vane, and of course, Jessup could look out for the little lady better than I could, as he thought her innocent."

"I don't believe you, Dan," Thorndike said, coolly.

"I knew you wouldn't—I know you don't. But

here's what I'm here to tell you. That Stone person is a wizard. He's going to ferret out the truth, and the truth is just what I've told you. When he gets to it, and he's nearly there now, there won't be a chance for Corinne! Not a chance! Also, I'm going to take a hand. I'm telling you this first, and afterward my actions depend on your decision."

"Go ahead, state your plans."

"Just this, then. You give me Corinne—oh, I know she isn't yours to give, but if you tell her to, she'll marry me, and in return I'll give you the play and also guarantee to have her relieved of all suspicion. I can do this, and you know it. Fleming Stone can't do it—all he can do is to get her in deeper than she's in now. I want her—oh, I'll be good to her, Guy—I'll make a queen of her. I'll cherish her as the apple of my eye and I vow I'll make her happy. You've been a brute to do what you have done but I'll overlook all that, if you'll see to it that she marries me—soon, say tomorrow. Then we'll beat it, and leave you here with the play all your own property. Thus, we'll all be happy, you with the play, me with the little girl, and she herself, because I'll give her the earth."

"Dan, I can't. I can't agree to turn that innocent child over to you, as if she were a slave or a chattel."

"What better fate have you in store for her? She won't stay here, now she knows of your villainous deception of her. It's far better for her to be honestly married to me than to be thrown on the world. I'm not a bad sort, Guy, in the main. And anyway, I don't know as you have the deciding vote in this matter. I only thought it would make things easier if you agreed. For if you don't, and if she doesn't, I shall let the inquiries go on that will land her in court, whatever the outcome of the trial may be."

"I'll have nothing to do with it, Dan. Go to it yourself. If Corinne agrees to marry you, of course I can put no obstacle in her way. If she refuses I shall not urge her. Then, if you see fit to persecute her and hound her down, I can't prevent it. Or, if I can prevent it I most certainly will."

"All right, I'll fix it up, and when I do, you shall have the Vane play. I'll be going where I'll have no use for it. Of course, we can't stay here. It would be too dangerous for her."

Larkin went straight to Prillilgirl with his plea, and found her in confab with the detective.

"Say anything you have to say to Mr. Stone," she directed. "He's my advisory board now," and she smiled at the stern faced detective.

So, rather glad to record his statements in this

fashion, Larkin repeated the conversation he had just had with Thorndike.

He rather colored Guy's part in it to suit his own purposes, and represented Thorndike as being quite willing Corinne should marry him, Larkin, in order to prevent his witnessing against her.

"And you saw Mrs. Thorndike stab Mr. Vane?" Stone inquired.

"Yes," Larkin asserted. "I never said anything about it because I knew those dunderheaded police would never discover it. But now that you are on the job, Mr. Stone, I know you'll find it out and—"

"How should I find it out?"

"Mrs. Thorndike would tell you herself—if she has not already done so."

"Tell me what?"

"That she fears—really she is pretty certain—that she killed Vane herself, while in a half dazed condition, brought about by the heat and by the other harassments of the moment."

Now this was exactly what Prillilgirl had told Stone, and Larkin's quick sapience realized it.

"And so," he went on, "I want to marry Mrs. Thorndike at once. It is well known that she is not really Mrs. Thorndike, and is not married to anybody. If she will consent to this—Mr. Thorndike has already consented—I will give to him the play written by Mr. Vane, which he so much desires."

Fleming Stone looked at the speaker a moment, and then said, "I think, Mr Larkin, that a straightforward proposal of marriage, which yours surely is, deserves a straightforward reply. But I must ask a little more patience. If you will leave me and Mrs. Thorndike by ourselves for about fifteen minutes, you can then have a definite and final answer."

"I'm a little tired of these postponements, but I agree to this one, since it sounds promising. Very well, Mr. Stone, I will be in the blue reception room, when you are ready to report."

The fifteen minutes passed. And promptly, Dan Larkin was summoned.

Thorndike also was called in, and Fleming Stone gave the announcement.

"Your request to marry this lady is to be granted, Mr. Larkin, if you will agree to certain details as to the ceremony."

"All such matters are, of course, at the lady's command." Larkin said, his face aglow with delight at the consent Stone had assured him.

"Miss Deane, as I think we will now call her," Stone said, smiling, "has developed a theatrical bent—spectacular, rather. She wants to be married by radio."

"By radio!" and Larkin looked blank. "How can that be managed? I'm willing, Lord knows, but

I don't know how to set about it. Wouldn't by telephone or wireless do? "

"No," and Prillilgirl gave him a smile that set his brain awirl, "I'm going to be married this time by a really, truly minister, but it's my whim to have it done by radio—Guy has a fine set—and so, it must be that way or not at all."

"I can help you out, if you like, Mr. Larkin," Stone said, carelessly. "I can get in touch with some one of the well known city ministers, and I can arrange it all—but it may cost a pretty penny."

"I don't care what it costs—spend any amount if you can only put it over."

"When would you like to have it arranged for? "

"The sooner the better. Tonight? "

"If I can fix it up. Shall I begin on the effort at once? "

"Yes, yes. Will you, Corinne, will you marry me to-night? "

"If I can have it done my own way. I'm a wilful piece, and if I choose to be married by radio, radio it must be! "

"And radio it shall be, if I have to buy up a whole station! Get busy, Stone, do! "

Fleming Stone went away and telephoned for some time.

It was a strange trio he left behind him. Thorn-

dike sat, glowering and silent. He stared hard at Prillilgirl but she paid not the slightest attention to him. He realized that he had passed out of her life as she was about to pass out of his.

Larkin was jubilant. He bubbled over with joy and his conversation ran on interminably, making plans for a wedding trip, leaving errands and messages for Thorndike to attend to, and promising his future wife all the pleasures that she could think of or invent.

He was not at all abashed by the comparative silence of the other two, and was still exuberantly rattling on when Stone returned.

"I succeeded in getting the Reverend James Barminster," he said, and Thorndike looked his amazement.

"Yes," Stone went on, "he's the rector of St. Chrysostom's church, as you know, and one of the finest and best men in town. It seems he had been broadcasting a lecture this afternoon, from his own church. And if he can arrange for an operator, and he thinks he can, he will meet your wishes, Mr. Larkin. The charge will be a thousand dollars—which he doesn't call a charge but a contribution to his church work. The operator's charge will be extra."

"What do I care about the charges? I say, Guy,

will you be best man, and attend to these financial details and——”

“No,” said Thorndike, shortly, “I won’t.”

“I will, Mr. Larkin,” Stone offered, I know how elated you are and I’ll attend to sordid details. You can give me a check that will cover all probable expenditures. I take it you’re not having any wedding party?”

“All as Miss Deane says,” and Larkin waved his hand toward Prillilgirl, who sat demurely still and listened to the plans being made.

“No,” she said, “no party. Just the radio wedding, and the proper witnesses and—and I’d like you to be present, Guy.”

Thorndike growled an unintelligible reply.

After a time Stone was again called to the telephone and received the word that the operator’s services had been secured and that the ceremony might begin at any time. It seemed a propitious time just then, as there was a lull in the official program and the minister hoped the marriage could take place at once.

“I’d like to talk to that minister,” Larkin declared, “It’s all right, of course, Mr. Best Man, but I’m Missourian by nature.”

“All right, Mr. Larkin.” Stone agreed. “Here, take the telephone yourself.”

The short interview was entirely satisfactory. The polite rector greeted the prospective bridegroom, and after an exchange of civilities, Stone announced that the ceremony would take place.

It was a strange scene. The minister's part of the service was broadcast on the radio and by means of an amplifier was audible to all. The responses of the bride and groom were given back to the minister by telephone, and were therefore also heard by Thorndike and Stone, who were the only witnesses.

Prillilgirl, her eyes very bright, stood at the library telephone, and Larkin, at an extension instrument in the next room. With the door open all could see and hear everything.

Once started it did not take very long, and as the pair were pronounced man and wife Larkin gave a veritable whoop of joy, while Thorndike, his face white, strode hastily out of the room.

Stone took up the telephone, assured the minister that all was satisfactorily accomplished, and promised to hand over the promised emolument the next morning.

"Where's the play?" said the bride to Larkin, for she had stipulated its actual presence and he had sent for it.

"Here you are," he said, handing her the manu-

script. "My first wedding gift to you, but by no means the last."

"Come back here, Guy," Prillilgirl called out, and the white-faced actor came back into the room.

"Here's the play, dear," she said, softly, the fond word falling unconsciously from her lips. "I give it to you."

As he took it, and looked deep in her eyes, Guy Thorndike read the whole tale of her love and self-sacrifice. Too late though it was, the scales fell from his own eyes and he knew that he had thrown away a priceless, peerless treasure.

Like an overwhelming flood the knowledge came to him, and he almost cried out in anguish that he wanted this girl woman for his own.

But Larkin's ugly, triumphant face thrust itself between them and he said,

"That'll do, Guy. She's mine now, you know. You had a chance at her, but it's too late now. You passed her up, so now you've no right even to look at her."

Thorndike gave him no heed but continued to gaze at Prillilgirl, who somehow bloomed happily under his gaze.

Stone, too, looked alert, expectant, as if drama were impending rather than achieved.

"Put that play in your safe, Guy," said Prillilgirl, speaking a bit peremptorily.

He obeyed, as he would have obeyed had she told him to put his hand in the flames.

He loved her, suddenly, madly, passionately, with all the force and fervor of his deep, strong nature.

And now it was too late. As Dan Larkin said, he had passed up his chance.

The quartette stood around a little awkwardly. Prillilgirl was the most composed of the four, and her eyes shone with a strange light as they occasionally rested on Thorndike. And when compelled to turn them toward Larkin, she cast them down quickly, but not before Guy caught a gleam of horror mixed with pity.

He was miserable, and longed for the time when the pair would go away and he could be alone with his grief. For his loss was irrevocable now. The marriage ceremony had been performed by a real minister this time.

"Well," Larkin said, at last, "I guess, my little wife, we'll be jogging along now. I'll carry you off to my enchanted castle for the present and then we'll decide on our plans. Say good night to your friends."

"Not quite yet, Mr. Larkin," came a voice from

the doorway, and McGee stepped in, accompanied by a plain-clothes man, while two bluecoats remained discreetly in the shadows of the outer hall.

Dan Larkin turned a livid, greenish hue.

He knew—oh, yes, he knew that the jig was up. He knew he had no smallest fraction of a chance to get away. His alert mind worked like lightning, but to no avail. His quick wits could find no way out, no loophole of escape.

“I arrest you for the murder of Mallory Vane,” was the first sentence that seeped into his suddenly paralyzed brain.

“Nonsense,” he cried, able to think of no other plan than a jaunty denial. “Is this a joke on a bridegroom?”

“A grim joke,” Fleming Stone said. “Better take it easy, Mr. Larkin, you’ll do no good by struggling.”

For as the handcuffs appeared Larkin showed fight, and there was imminent danger of a tussle.

The arms of the law were strong, however, and in a few moments the erstwhile happy and jubilant bridegroom was transformed into an ugly, snarling criminal at bay.

“Take these off!” he shouted, “take them off, I say! I’ll break every one of you for this!”

“There, there, now, Mr. Larkin, use your

common sense!" This from McGee. "You can't get out of those little bracelets, you know. You've got to answer questions, you know—now take it easy, do."

The placid tones calmed the angry man a little, for he recognized the wisdom of the advice.

"We want a confession," McGee said. He was in no way taking the glory of this capture away from its rightful owner, Fleming Stone, but the great detective had asked that the details of the inquiry be left to McGee.

"We want a confession, and we're going to get it, here—or in your cell. Anything to say?"

"Yes, I've a lot to say. First, I did kill Mallory Vane—you've got the goods on me, so what's the use of denying it. But I want to know how you found out. Through that sneaking hound, Stone, I suppose."

"Yes," said Stone, quite unperturbed, "I'm the sneaking hound that did for you. Now don't waste your breath villifying me, it isn't worth while. I discovered your guilt first from the check you left on Vane's desk. By the way, you drew that check after you killed Vane, didn't you?"

"How do you know?"

"Because you went over to a little old desk of Jessup's in the far corner of the room, and used an

old rusty pen and poor ink that is there. Had you made out the check while Vane was there to receive it, you would have drawn it at his own desk with his own tidy and convenient writing materials."

"Not with that Devil's Dagger of a pen!"

"No! For when you drew the check the dagger was already in Vane's breast, thrust there by your hand."

"You know too much!" Larkin's growl was like that of an enraged wild animal.

"You killed Vane because he had concluded to let Mr. Mortimer have his play. You put the check there afterward to carry out your story of having bought the play from Vane. And then, when you went in the studio building, slyly sneaking up the stairs instead of taking the elevator, you saw Guy Thorndike coming out, and you planned then and there to pin the crime on him."

"I didn't mean to kill him when—"

"When you went there. No, I know you didn't. You were so furious about the play—and I think there was another side that I prefer to do no more than touch upon—I think you feared Vane was going to get ahead of you in the affections of Mrs. Guy Thorndike——"

"That's it!" And Larkin's teeth bared in a fiendish grin. "But I beat 'em all out there! The

lady is my wife—by all the laws of God and man! She can't testify against me, she can't be kept away from me——”

“That will do,” and Stone's upraised hand and serious face made the ranter pause.

“That lady is not married to you at all.”

“You tricked me? You lied to me! You told me that was a real minister!”

“So he was. So he is. But the laws of the state of New York do not recognize a marriage as legal, unless the officiating clergyman is in the actual presence of the couple to be united. You are no more married to Miss Corinne Deane than you were this morning. The lady knew this all the time.”

“Then she—she——”

“She tricked you, yes, but you deserved it. She tricked you, with my assistance, in order to get that play, which you have no further use for. But which we feared might never be found if left long in your care.”

“No, and you wouldn't have found it, either! It was cleverly hidden, until—until——”

He gave a glance at Prillilgirl, and even his frenzied mind and blind rage halted at sight of the lovely face, streaming now with tears—and tears of sorrow for the worthless wretch before her.

“Don't cry, Corinne,” he said, gently, and it was

probably the last kindly word he ever spoke. They took him away, and Stone stayed but a short time to talk over the matter.

"You see, Mr. Thorndike," the detective said, "Larkin is so fiendishly clever. When he saw you leaving the Vane studio that day, he was just entering. You didn't see him of course, so he calmly said you were going in, when as a matter of fact, he was going in and you were coming out. Then, he represented to you that your wife was the guilty one, and at the same time told her that you killed Vane. Every possible lie he could think of, he told, until he had the police so filled up with his fables that it's no wonder they couldn't straighten things out. The first hint I had was when I discovered that check was written at that old unused desk. That was doubtless to get as far away from the dead man as possible. Of course, he had no idea that Miss Deane was senseless in the telephone booth. And hearing nothing, she could not know that her husband went away and Mr. Larkin came in. Indeed, she was probably unconscious through most of it all."

"And I'm glad I was," said Prillilgirl fervently.

Stone, being a transcendent detective, deduced it was time for him to go to his room, and with a good-night remark or two, he went.

"Please call Lamb," Prillilgirl said, not looking at Thorndike.

Instead, he took a few strides across the room and stood before her. "So Jessup taught you how to love, did he?"

"Yes, Guy," she said, with a demure expression as she glanced up into his face.

"And you love him?"

"Oh, no, Guy."

"Don't talk nonsense!" He gave her a little involuntary shake. "What do you mean?"

"Why, you see, he taught me how to love you." I didn't know what love meant, and he told me what it meant. He said—if I felt a thrill whenever I was near somebody, or if I felt I just couldn't live without somebody, and to know that he was the only human being in the world for me—— And I do feel all those things——for you. And I love you so, Guy, oh, please, please, let me teach you to love me!"

"Teach me! You precious thing! Why, I worship you, I adore you! *I* will teach *you* what love means!"

"Oh, Guy, I can't believe it!"

"I'll make you believe it, Sweet o' the Year! Flower of my Heart! Love of my life! Prillilgirl, I'll *make* you believe it! Why, you're trembling, you scared baby! I love you, darling, and I'll kiss

you until you have to believe it! There! Did that frighten you? ”

“ Guy, will you please call Lamb——”

“ Look here, Pril, do you remember the night you came here and said, ‘ I’ve decided to marry you’? ”

“ Yes, I remember.”

“ Well——now I’ve decided to marry you! ”

THE END

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